

SOVIET LITERATURE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

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THE BRONZE BIRD



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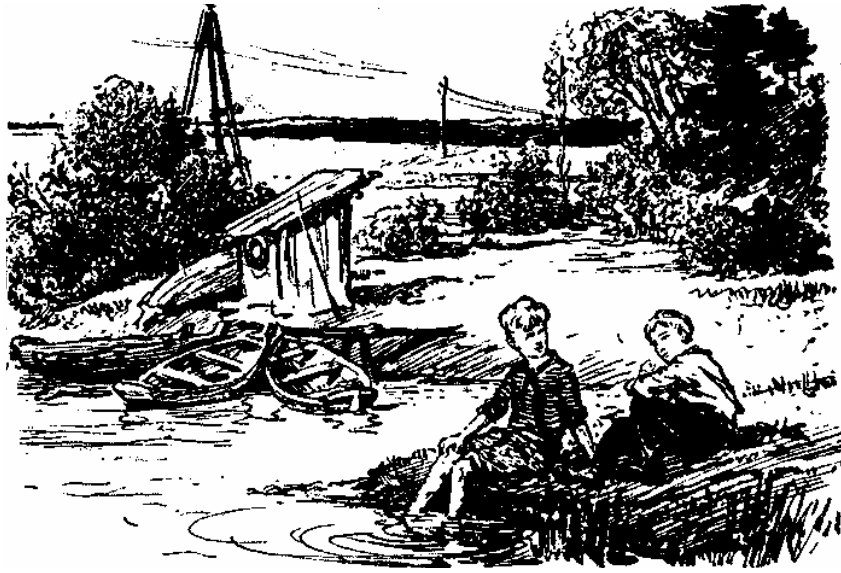
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Part I

FUGITIVES

Chapter I

THINGS YOU CAN'T FORESEE

Genka and Slava were sitting on the bank of the Utcha.

Genka, his red hair sticking out in all directions, his pants rolled up above his knees and the sleeves of his striped singlet above his elbows, was eyeing the tiny boat station with a disdainful expression on his face.

"Call this a station!" he said, dangling his feet in the water. "They stuck a life belt on a hen-coop and think they've got a station!"

Slava was silent. His pale face, with its slight, rosy tan, looked thoughtful. Chewing a blade of grass in a melancholy way, he was reflecting on a distressing thing that had happened in the camp.

Why did it have to happen just when he, Slava, had been left in charge? True, it was a duty he shared with Genka, but Genka never gave a hang for anything. Here he was dangling his feet in the water without a care in the world.

That indeed was exactly what he was doing.

"A station!" he commented. "Three broken-down tubs! I can't stand show-offs! And there's nothing to show off about! They should simply have written: 'boats for hire,' or 'landing.' That would have been modest and to the point. But 'station'!"

"I'm sure I don't know what we're going to say to Kolya," Slava sighed.

"What's there to say? We're not to blame. And if he starts lecturing I'm going to tell him straight, 'Look, Kolya, you've got to be objective. Nobody's

to blame. Besides, life's full of things you can never foresee." And with a philosophical air he added, "Yes, life would not be worth while living without them."

"What are you talking about?"

"Things you can't foresee."

"You've got no sense of responsibility," Slava said, scanning the road leading from the railway station.

"Sense, 'responsibility'!" Genka said with a contemptuous wave of his hand. "Beautiful words.... Everyone answers for himself. Back in Moscow I said we shouldn't take any Young Pioneers to camp with us. I warned them, didn't I? But nobody listened."

"It's no use talking to you," Slava replied indifferently.

For some time they sat in silence, Genka dangling his feet in the water and Slava chewing his blade of grass.

It was baking hot in the July sun. A grasshopper was chirping tirelessly in the grass. The river, narrow and deep and hidden in the shadow of the shrubbery overhanging its banks, wound its way through fields, hugged the foot of the hills, carefully skirted round the villages and disappeared in the forest, hushed, dark and cool.

The wind brought the sounds of a rural street from a village nestling at the foot of a mountain in the distance. The village looked like a haphazard heap of iron, plank and thatched roofs lying amidst the greenery of orchards. Near the stream, by the ferry, the bank was criss-crossed by a dense network of footpaths.

Slava kept his eyes on the road. The Moscow train had probably arrived and Kolya Sevastyanov and Misha Polyakov would be here any minute. Slava sighed.

"Sighing?" Genka smirked. "Those ohs and ahs! How many times have I told you...."

"There they are!" Slava rose, shading his eyes with his hand.

Genka stopped dangling his feet and climbed to the top of the bank.

"Where? Hm. It's them all right. Misha's in front. Behind him.... No, it's not Kolya. Some chap or other. It's Korovin! 'Pon my word, it's Korovin, remember the chap who was a waif? And he's got a sack on his shoulders."

"Books, probably."

The boys gazed intently at the small figures moving up the narrow path across the fields. And although they were still far away, Genka spoke in a whisper:

"Only bear in mind, Slava, I'll do all the talking. Don't interfere or you'll spoil everything. I'll pull it off, don't you worry. Especially as Kolya hasn't come. What's Misha? I know how to handle him even if he is the assistant leader."

For all his bravado, Genka felt decidedly uncomfortable. There was an unpleasant talk ahead.

Chapter 2

UNPLEASANT TALK

Misha and Korovin put the sacks down on the ground.

"Why are you here?" Misha demanded.

He was in a dark blue cap and a leather jerkin, which he wore even in summer, believing that it made him look like a real Komsomol activist.

"Just like that." Genka felt the sacks. "Books?"

"Yes."

"Where's Kolya?"

"He won't be coming. He's been called up. He's going to the Navy."

"I see," Genka drawled. "Who are they sending instead?"

Misha did not reply at once. He took off his cap and smoothed his black hair.

"Who are they sending?" Genka asked again.

Misha did not reply at once because he had been appointed leader of the troop and did not know how to break this news to his friends in a way that would preclude their thinking he was putting on airs and make them immediately accept him as their leader. It was not easy to give orders to fellows you shared the same desk with. On the way Misha had thought of a phrase or two which he hoped would help him out of the difficulty. Diffidently, with exaggerated nonchalance, he said:

"For the time being I've been put in charge."

He had placed great hopes on the phrase "for the time being." Indeed, who should temporarily substitute for a leader if not the second in command?

But the unassuming and shy "for the time being" did not make the impression he thought it would.

"You?" Genka said, goggling his eyes. "But what weight will we carry in the village? Everybody, even the old folk, had a high opinion of Kolya."

That forced Misha to draw upon the second of his prepared rescue phrases.

"I turned down the appointment, but the District Committee confirmed it." Feeling the authority that the mention of the District Committee gave him, he asked sternly, "Why did you leave the camp?"

"We left Zina Kruglova in charge," Genka put in hastily.

That, Misha told himself, was the fruit of a little sternness.

Slava, meanwhile, in an apologetic tone in his voice, said:

"You see, Misha...."

But Genka cut him short:

"How are you, Korovin? Have you come to pay us a visit?"

"No, I'm here on business," Korovin replied, inhaling noisily through his nose. Thick-set, stocky, he looked fat and clumsy in his labour commune uniform. Beads of sweat shone on his face and he kept brushing the flies

away with his hand.

"You've certainly put on weight at the commune," Genka noted.

"The food's pretty good," Korovin said in his artless way.

"What brings you here?"

Misha explained that the children's home where Korovin lived was being converted into a labour commune and that it was taking over the local manor and estate for the purpose. They were expecting the headmaster tomorrow. Korovin had been sent on ahead to make inquiries.

Out of modesty, Misha did not tell his friends that properly speaking this had been his idea. He had met Korovin in the street on the previous day and had learned from him that the children's home was looking for a place near Moscow in which to establish a labour commune. Misha said he knew of a place that he thought would be suitable. Their camp, he said, was in the former estate of Karagayevo. True, it was in Ryazan Gubernia, but that was not far from Moscow. The estate was untenanted. Nobody was living in the huge manor-house. Altogether it was a wonderful place, in fact the best that could be found for a commune. That same day Korovin had passed the information on to the headmaster, who told him to go with Misha, promising to follow on the next day.

That was how Korovin really came to be here, but Misha did not tell his friends the whole story so that they would not think he was boasting. All he told them was that there would be a labour commune here.

"Boy!" Genka whistled. "I can just see the countess letting them in!"

"Who's that?" Korovin asked with a questioning look at Misha.

"The estate," Genka explained, sawing the air with his hands> "belonged to a landlord, a certain Count Karagayev. He beat it after the Revolution, taking everything with him, except the house, of course. There's only an old woman, a relative of the count's or a hanger-on, living in the place. We call her the countess. She's looking after the manor and won't let anybody in. And that goes for you, too."

Korovin again inhaled through his nose, but with a shade of injury this time:

"How d'you mean she won't let us in? The estate belongs to the government."

"Exactly," Misha hastily interposed. "The countess has a safeguard for the house only because it's a historical monument. Either Tsaritsa Elizabeth or Catherine II once stayed in it. And the countess thrusts that safeguard into everybody's noses. But judge for yourself, if all the houses the tsars and tsaritsas stayed in are to remain empty, then where are the people going to live?" And considering the question settled, he said, "Come on, chaps! Korovin and I've been hauling these sacks all the way from the station. You carry them now."

Genka quickly lifted one of them. But Slava made no move.

"You see, Misha," he said, "yesterday Igor and Seva...."

"Oh yes," Genka said, interrupting him and lowering the sack to the ground, "I was going to tell you, but Slava shot his mouth. You're always doing that, Slava. Well, you see, Misha," he faltered, "the thing is.... How to

put it"

"Stop beating about the bush," Misha said angrily. " 'You see,' 'you understand!'"

"Hold your horses. It's like this. Igor and Seva have run away."

"What! Where to?"

"To fight the fascists."

"What's all this nonsense!"

"Here, read this yourself."

Genka gave Misha a note. It was very short: "Good-bye, chaps, we've gone to fight the fascists. Igor. Seva."

Misha read it a few times.

"What utter nonsense!" he said, shrugging his shoulders. "When did this happen?"

"Yesterday, I mean today," Genka began to explain. "Yesterday they went to bed the same time as everybody else, but when we woke up this morning, they were gone. We found this note. Last night I thought they were acting suspiciously when they suddenly began to polish their boots as though it were a holiday. It made me want to laugh."

But Misha did not think it was a joke.

"Have you looked for them?"

"Everywhere. In the woods and in the village."

"Fine deputies you are," Misha said with a deprecatory gesture of his hand, giving Genka and Slava a withering look.

"What have we got to do with it?" Genka and Slava cried in unison.

"Plenty! Nobody ran away before!"

Genka pressed his hand to his breast.

"I give you my word of honour."

"You can keep your word of honour," Misha stopped him. "Let's go to the camp!"

Genka and Slava shouldered the sacks and followed Misha.

Chapter 3

THE MANOR

The path twisted and turned across fields.

Genka chattered without stop, but when he spoke he had to wave his hands and so somehow, without anyone noticing it, the sack returned to Korovin's shoulders.

"Even if you outwit the countess," Genka rambled on, "it won't be easy to organize a labour commune here and get things going. In fact, I'll say it's impossible. There's nothing in the estate, only the house. Not a thing else. No harrow, plough or cart. And don't think for a moment that the peasants got them. They were all pinched by the kulaks. I can swear to that! The kulaks they've got here have got all the others beat. You can't imagine what they're doing."

"What?" Korovin asked.

"You *are* a numskull! We came here to organize a Young Pioneer troop, but look at the odds against us. First, the kulaks. Second, religion. Third, lack of understanding by the parents: they're not letting the kids join. When we put on a show, we get a full house, but the minute we announce a meeting, they all scatter."

"I know all about that," Korovin observed meaningfully.

"Exactly," Genka went on. "And the village kids themselves.... They're steeped in superstition! Wood-goblins and devils are all they talk about. Try and organize them!"

"So you're finding it difficult, what?"

"That's not the half of it," Genka said in a mournful voice, but the next moment he added boastfully, "but we've done harder things. And we'll get this job done too. Here, we've brought them books," he tapped the sack Korovin was carrying for him, "we're giving shows and we're helping to stamp out illiteracy. You'll see, we'll organize the first Young Pioneer troop. Isn't that right, Misha?"

Misha made no reply. He was thinking how unhappily his duties as troop leader were starting. Two Young Pioneers had disappeared on the very first day. Where could they have gone? They could not go far without money or food. They might get lost in the woods, drown in the river, or get run over by a train.

Should he inform their parents? No, not for the time being anyway. Why worry them for nothing? The boys would be found sooner or later. Besides, their parents would raise the alarm throughout the whole of Moscow. And in the village, people were now probably saying that the Young Pioneers were running away, that children should not be allowed to join the troop. That was what Igor and Seva had done. They had undermined the troop's prestige, setting all its labours of the past month at naught!

These gloomy thoughts were interrupted by Genka, who cried out:

"There's the manor!"

The boys stopped.

A two-storeyed house surrounded by trees stood before them high on a hill. It seemed to have several roofs and many chimneys. A big, semicircular verandah with banisters resting on small, white, brick posts divided the house into two equal halves. Over the verandah there was a loft with windows on either side and a recess in the middle. A broad avenue led across the garden to the house. The first, smooth earthen stretch gave way to sloping stone steps that gradually formed a staircase running round the verandah on both sides.

"Like it?" Genka asked, clicking his tongue.

"The important thing is what it's got," Korovin said, inhaling noisily.

"Nothing," Genka assured him.

Indeed, the estate looked neglected. The orchard was overgrowing with weeds, and the pond was covered with filthy-green slime. Every thing looked dead, lifeless, cheerless.

It was only when the boys had penetrated deep into the orchard that the

oppressive silence around them was broken by resounding young voices.

There were white tents beyond a broken fence. That was the camp. The troop came running to meet Misha. Zina Kruglova was in front. She ran the fastest on her stubby legs.

Chapter 4

THE TROOP

Properly speaking, this was not the whole troop but only a group of 15 of its eldest members. Nine were Komsomols. The others were due to be accepted as Komsomols in the autumn. But they called themselves a troop, and why not?

Three tents stood beneath trees along the edge of a glade, in the middle of which was a tall flag-staff with a pennant fluttering on it. A fire was burning nearby. Over it was a charred stick supported by two tripods. The children on kitchen duty were busy cooking dinner. There was a strong smell of burnt milk.

"Everything is in order," Zina said, speaking very quickly. "We've sent off the letter to the sailors of the Red Fleet and held an illiteracy-abolition class yesterday. Eight people turned up instead of twelve. I suppose they," Zina nodded in the direction of Genka and Slava, "have already told you about Igor and Seva."

At the mention of Igor and Seva, everybody began to talk at once. Borya Baranov, nicknamed the Bleater, made himself heard above the din. In stature he was smaller than the others, but he was a fierce champion of justice. He thought that had it not been for him, falsehood and injustice would have reigned unchecked in the world. And he shouted the loudest of all:

"They ran away because of Genka!"

"That's a lie, you miserable Bleater!" Genka cried indignantly. But Misha ordered the Bleater to tell him what had happened. With his usual solemnity whenever he fought for justice, the Bleater began:

"I'll tell you the whole truth. I've got no reason to add or invent anything."

"Cut out the preliminaries," Misha hurried him; the Bleater's introduction could very well drag on for half an hour at least.

"Well," the Bleater went on, "when we went to bed we had a talk. That was after the play *Death to Fascism*. Igor and Seva said that instead of staging plays we should fight the fascists so that they would not kill Communists. Genka began to deride them, saying, 'You go and fight the fascists and we'll see what happens.' Igor got mad and said, 'If we make up our minds, we'll go.' Then Genka said, 'Start making up your minds, start making up your minds!' That's how it was. And in the morning when Genka woke up, he said, 'What, you still here? I thought you had run away to fight the fascists.' After that the first thing that Genka asked them every morning was, 'How many fascists have you killed today?' He went on teasing them

until in the end they ran away. That's what happened. I've got no call to lie. I never lie."

"Genka, is that the truth?" Misha demanded.

"It's true, it's true!" cried the children of Genka's section.

"He's always teasing people," grumbled Filya Kitov, or Kit, (*Kit—the Russian for whale.—Tr.*) as he was called by his friends. He had a passion for food and was always chewing something.

"Genka, is that the truth?" Misha repeated.

Genka shrugged his shoulders.

"What relation does that have? All right, so it's true. I teased them a little. You know why? So that they would put that silliness out of their heads. But like fools they ran away. They couldn't take a joke. Makes me laugh."

"It makes you laugh, does it?" Misha shouted.

Flaring up, he suddenly tore the cap off his head and threw it on the ground.

All eyes were fixed on him.

He remembered that he was now the leader of the troop and had to control himself. He picked the cap up and put it on.

"All right. First we'll find them and then see who's to blame. Have your dinner quickly and we'll begin to look for them."

Genka brightened up.

"That's right. We'll find them in double-quick time. You'll see, Misha."

At dinner Misha questioned the boys who had been on duty, but they swore they did not see anything. Yet Igor and Seva had taken with them all their belongings, even their mugs and spoons. And nobody had noticed it!

They could have gone home. But before sending after them to Moscow, Misha decided to make a thorough search in the vicinity.

It struck Misha that the manor was the most probable place where the boys could have hidden themselves. He decided to go there with Korovin and send the rest of the troop to scour the woods.

"Comb the woods," he said. "Genka and his section—from the direction of the village, Slava's section—from the river, and Zina's—from the park. Form a chain and keep calling out to each other. Be back -by seven o'clock."

Genka, Slava and Zina lined up their sections and marched them at the double to the areas assigned to them.

Misha and Korovin went to the manor.

Only Kit stayed behind in camp. He was always ready to take somebody's turn at kitchen duty. Licking his lips, he began to cook supper.

Chapter 5

THE MANSION AND ITS INHABITANTS

To avoid meeting the "countess," Misha chose not the central walk but took Korovin along one of the side avenues.

"First let's find out if she's in," he said.

"How will you know that?"

"You'll see," Misha replied mysteriously.

Reaching the central walk through the shrubbery, the boys stopped and drew aside the branches of a tree.

The old house was directly in front of them. The plastering had peeled off here and there, baring strips of splintered lath and pieces of tow. The broken windows were carelessly boarded up with plywood cut with an ordinary saw, which left the edges uneven. Some of the windows simply had planks of various thickness and size nailed to them.

"She's at home," Misha whispered in a disappointed tone of voice.

In reply to Korovin's inquiring glance, he indicated the loft with his eyes.

In the recess was a big bronze bird with outspread wings, an exceedingly long neck and a great hooked beak. With sharp claws it clung to a thick bough. The huge, round eyes with long, almost human-like eyebrows, gave the bird a strange, terrifying expression.

"See that?"

"Yes," Korovin whispered, overwhelmed by the sinister-looking bronze statue.

"It's an eagle."

"I don't think so," Korovin shook his head doubtfully. "I've seen eagles on the Volga."

"You get different kinds of eagles," Misha whispered. "On the Volga they're one kind, here another. But that's not the point. Look closely. See the shutters behind the bird? They're open, aren't they?"

"Yes."

"Well, whenever they're open, it means the countess is at home. She closes them when she goes to town. Understand? Remember this is a secret which I don't want anyone else to know."

"It's all the same to me," Korovin replied indifferently, "because we're going to take that house over anyway. It's got room for at least two hundred kids, while here she's occupying it all by herself. Is that just?"

"Of course, not," Misha agreed. "I hope you take the estate soon. Here's what! Let's look for Igor and Seva in the sheds. They're probably hiding there and laughing up their sleeves at us."

Keeping to the shrubbery, the boys skirted round the house, went up to the back wall of the stables and clambered into them through a small broken window.

There was a musty smell of rotting logs and boards and old manure. The partitions between the stalls had been taken down and there were holes in the ground where the supporting beams lay. The boys drew back in fright as a flock of sparrows rose suddenly and flew out of the stables on swishing wings. Stepping carefully across the broken floor, Misha and Korovin made their way through the stables to a shed.

It was darker there. There were no windows and although the gates had been taken off their hinges they had been leaned snugly into the gate frame without leaving any chink through which light could penetrate. It smelled of

mice, fusty hay and stale flour-dust.

Misha seized hold of a rafter, pulled himself up and climbed into the hayloft. Then he helped his lumbering friend up. The decayed rafters bent beneath their weight. There were bumble-bee nests all over the underside of the roof. The blue sky could be seen through the slits.

The friends looked round the hayloft, then climbed into the next shed through the dormer. But there was no trace of the fugitives. As a matter of fact, only Misha was looking for them. Korovin was more concerned with the strength of the beams. He was smacking his lips to show his disappointment at finding everything so old and in disrepair. The boys returned by the same route, intending to look into the machine-shed, where formerly agricultural machines had been kept. It stood apart from the other sheds and to get to it the boys had to run across a piece of ground in full view of the house.

Misha was about to slip out of the shed when suddenly he jumped back, nearly knocking over Korovin, who was standing behind him. Korovin wanted to see what had alarmed his friend, but Misha grabbed him by his arm and nodded in the direction of the house.

A tall, thin old woman in a black dress and a black shawl was standing at the top of the staircase. Her grey head was bowed, her face furrowed by long wrinkles, her sharp hooked nose bent like the beak of a bird. In the deathly stillness of the neglected estate there was something dismal and weird about this black, motionless figure.





The boys stood as if rooted to the ground.

Finally, the old woman turned, took a few slow steps as though she walked without bending her knees, and disappeared into the house.

"See that?" Misha whispered.

"I could almost feel my blood freezing," Korovin replied, breathing heavily.

Chapter 6

WHAT IS TO BE DONE NOW?

The whole troop was assembled when Misha and Korovin got back to camp. The search had been fruitless.

Disappointed, anxious about their lost comrades, tired and worn out, they sat down to a cheerless supper. On top of everything, Kit announced that their food supply was running out and that he doubted if there was enough for the next day.

"Don't judge by your own appetite," Genka remarked. "You can check for yourself," Kit said in a hurt tone of voice. "There's practically no butter left. Nor biscuits. Cereals...."

"Don't worry," Misha said. "Genka and the Bleater will go to Moscow in the morning and bring back supplies."

This time it was Genka who spoke in an injured tone: "Why should I do all the donkey work? You think I like dragging a sackload of provisions in this heat: Besides, the stuff's got to be begged from parents! Some mayn't be at home, others mayn't have prepared anything."

"I'm sending you because you've got experience." "You can bet your boots I have," Genka said with a self-contented grin, stuffing porridge into his mouth. "Your Yura's putting on weight. He's got a wolf's appetite. Yesterday he chewed the tail off the landlord's sheep! That's the kind of

approach that makes them cough up. Oh, hell, if only we could have some rich patron! Say a confectionery."

"I'd prefer a sausage factory," Kit sighed with visions of sausages sizzling on a frying-pan. He even screwed up his eyes at the thought.

After supper everybody remained sitting round the fire. Those on kitchen duty were washing the dishes. Moving his lips, Kit was counting the packets of flour and slices of bread. There was a preoccupied look on his face as was always the case when before him there were edibles he could see and feel. Genka and the Bleater were getting the sacks ready for the provisions. To be more exact, the Bleater was doing the work and Genka was issuing instructions and at the same time examining his famous brief-case. Although badly battered, it was real and made of leather with numerous partitions and with shining, nickel-plated locks. Genka was very proud of it. He always took it with him when he went to Moscow for supplies because he thought it impressed the parents he went to see. To make that impression stronger, he would put it on the table while he spoke and keep clicking the locks with an important air.

"Works like magic," he said. "If it weren't for this brief-case, the troop would have died of hunger long ago."

On these expeditions to Moscow, Genka confined himself to swinging his brief-case, while his companion had to carry the sack.

"Look here, Genka," Misha said, "say nothing to Igor's and Seva's parents, but try and find out diplomatically if they have been to Moscow."

"I'll find out, don't worry."

"Only be careful or you'll alarm the parents."

"I told you not to worry, didn't I? I'll ask incidentally like."

"How will you ask?"

"I shan't even do that, but sort of say: your Igor was planning to come home."

"What for?"

"To go to the baths."

"Who'll believe you?"

"You think so? Then I'll say he was planning to come to Moscow for books."

"That's better."

"What if he should be in Moscow," Genka continued, "and his mother says that he's at home? I'll pretend I'm surprised and say that he must have got there before me. If she tells me he's playing in the yard, I'll thank her, of course, but I'll go out and give that Igor a punch he'll remember for a long time."

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Slava remarked.

"No, of course not," Misha agreed, "but they'll have to be taught a lesson. I would have gone myself but," he gave Slava a withering look, "there's nobody I can trust to remain in charge here. So let Genka and the Bleater go."

"I'll go," the Bleater suddenly declared, "but I'm warning you that if Genka makes me carry the sack while he goes about waving his brief-case,

I'll chuck everything and come back. So there! I'm telling you straight."

"When have I ever made you carry anything without helping you?" Genka demanded hotly.

"That's always your game!" shouted everyone who had ever gone to town with Genka.

"Not so much noise," Misha said. "You'll carry the sack by turns. Only see that you don't miss the train. Tomorrow," he continued, addressing the troop, "we'll all go to the village. Time we finished the club."

For some time nobody spoke. They were all tired after the excitement of the day.

The dry branches crackled and burned brightly, throwing up sparks that lost themselves in the darkness.

"Listen!" Zina whispered suddenly.

Everybody fell silent and turned in the direction of the woods.

A branch cracked. There was a movement in the trees as though a breeze were rustling the leaves. A deep sigh was heard.

Signing to the troop to remain seated, Misha got up and peered into the darkness of the woods, listening to the strange sounds.

Had Igor and Seva finally returned?

Chapter 7

VASKA LONGSHANKS

But it was neither Seva nor Igor.

The lad who approached the fire was Vaska Longshanks. He was wearing a white shirt and narrow hempen pants that barely reached his thin, angular knees. He was tall for his age, very thin and scraggy. He lived with his mother and elder brother, Nikolai, in a ramshackle hut on the very edge of the village. His father had been killed in the German war.

Of all the boys in the village, Longshanks was on the friendliest terms with the Komsomols. And in their turn they liked him. He was kind and always ready to lend a helping hand. True, he believed in devils and stuff like that, but he knew the woods and the river and could tell fascinating stories. His elder brother was a carpenter and was helping the troop to fix up the club.

"Oh, it's you," Misha drawled with disappointment.

"It's me, all right," Longshanks said, sitting down by the fire with a good-natured grin.

In the dancing shadows cast by the fire, the fair, unevenly cut locks (they must have been cut with blunt scissors) on his big head looked even more entangled than usual. He raked up some coals with a twig and said:

"In the village they're saying that two of your Young Pioneers have disappeared."

"Rubbish," Misha replied with forced indifference, "they'll turn up."

Longshanks shook his head doubtfully.

"I wouldn't say that. They might never come back if they've wandered into the Goligin Brushwood Road."

Their interest aroused, the children crowded closer round the fire. "What's this road you're talking about?" Zina asked. "It's a path in the woods made of brushwood. Sometimes you get log-paths," Slava explained. "And they're usually laid across swamps."

"That's right," Longshanks said. "This one was laid across a swamp, too. Only that was long ago and nobody uses it now."

"What was it you wanted to say about this brushwood road?" Genka asked impatiently.

"The Goligin road? Only that if your chaps have gone there they may never come back."

"You mean they'll drown?" Zina Kruglova asked.

"No," Longshanks shook his head, "but they'll see the old count and die."

"There you go with your fairy stories again," Genka said with a smirk. "Don't you ever get tired of inventing them?"

"I'm not inventing anything," Longshanks replied gravely, "it's true, every word of it. Any of the old folks will tell you that the count and his son are buried there, right under the brushwood road. A Tsaritsa came to these

parts long ago, long before Napoleon. Well, she came and put them to death. And she did not allow them to be buried, but had them thrown into the mud, under the brushwood road, so that people would drive over them. That's how they lie there to this day."

"How does it concern our chaps?" Misha asked.

"Listen then. As I said, the old count and his son lie buried there, only not in the usual way. And their souls are in torment because they can't go either to heaven or to hell."

"This is killing!" Genka shouted. "Old wives' tales!"

"Let a chap finish," Korovin remarked irritably.

"As I said, their souls are in torment," Longshanks continued sternly, with a note of sorrow in his voice, "and they are groaning under the brushwood road, groaning and groaning. I've been there myself and I've heard them. The old count groans in a muffled sort of way; he groans and stops, groans and stops. But his son groans loudly, as though he's weeping, give you my word!"

"How awful," the Nekrasov sisters whispered and cast a furtive look at the woods; but that only frightened them more and they drew closer to the fire.

"And at midnight the old count rises from under the road," Longshanks went on monotonously, imitating old men. "His beard reaches down to his knees and his hair is all white. He rises and waits. If he sees a passer-by, he says to him, 'Go to the tsaritsa and tell her to give us a Christian burial. Do us that favour.' He begs, with tears in his voice. Then he bows. Instead of a cap, he takes off his head. He holds it in his hands and bows. That's enough to give anyone the creeps, to put lead into your feet. And bowing, with his head in his hands, the old count goes up to you. The most important thing for the passer-by is to stand stock-still. If he doesn't move, the count will come right up to him and vanish. If he turns tail and runs, he will drop dead on the spot and the count will drag him under the brushwood road."

"Has he done that to many people?" Misha asked with a smile.

"In the old days, yes. But nobody goes there now. There was a party from Moscow. They dug up the road but naturally you wouldn't expect them to find the old count and his son. When the militia left, they lay in ambush again."

"What were they executed for?" somebody asked.

"Nobody knows! Some say for treason, others—that they had concealed a hoard of gold from the royal treasury."

"I should have known there'd be treasure in this," Genka observed ironically. "That's in the ordinary run."

"Were you telling us about the local counts?" Misha asked, waving his hand in the direction of the manor.

"Yes," Longshanks nodded, "about their ancestors. The count who fled across the border is the grandson of the one buried under the brushwood road."

"Stories!" Misha said, yawning.

"No," Longshanks protested. "It's what the old folk say."

"Not everything they say is true." Misha shrugged his shoulders. "Look at the miracles they used to ascribe to relics of the saints, but when they began to confiscate valuables from the church for the famine relief they found nothing in these relics. It was just a pack of lies. They're clouding your brains, that's what!"

Misha looked at his watch. It was a pocket-watch remade to wear on the wrist and was so big that it showed from under the sleeve of Misha's shirt. It was half past eight.

"Play lights out," Misha ordered the bugler.

The loud notes of the bugle pierced the silence of the night.

"We'll come to do the club in the morning," Misha said to Longshanks as the latter took his leave. "I want you and the other chaps to go to the woods and cut some fir branches to decorate the club with."

"All right," Longshanks agreed. "Will you bring any books?"

"Definitely. And ask Nikolai to come, too. We need his help to finish the stage and the benches."

"He'll come," Longshanks replied confidently.

His shirt gleamed white among the trees and disappeared. There was a crackle of branches. Then all was still.

"Isn't he brave to walk alone in the woods at night?" Zina said.

"What's so brave about that?" Genka said boastfully. "I'll go anywhere you like at night. Even to that silly brushwood road."

"You'd better turn in," Misha said, "or you'll be late for the train tomorrow."

The troop dispersed to the tents. For some time there was the sound of bustle and laughter. Misha made his last round of the camp and checked the posts. Stopping at each tent, he said loudly, "Cut the racket. Sleep." At last, Misha, too, went to bed. Quiet reigned.

The moon lit up the sleeping camp.

But not everybody was asleep.

The sentries paced their beats across the glade, meeting at the flagstaff and parting again.

Misha lay and thought where Igor and Seva could have gone to and what ought to be done tomorrow if they should not prove to be in Moscow.

Slava was tortured by the thought that Igor and Seva had run away when he was left behind as acting leader.

The girls listened to the silence of the dark woods and, remembering Longshanks' story about the Goligin Brushwood Road, timorously drew the blankets closer about them.

Korovin lay awake, thinking that on the whole the estate was suitable for a labour commune. As for the old woman, terrible as she was, Boris Sergeyevich would soon tame her.

Genka fell asleep the moment his head touched his pillow.

The Bleater grew indignant at the thought that Genka would walk ahead and swing his brief-case in his hand and force him, the Bleater, to carry the sack of provisions. He searched his mind for a just and proud reply to Genka and gloated at the thought how Genka would be taken aback when he

saw that he, the Bleater, had taken along two sacks instead of one.

Kit tossed and turned the longest. He thought of the food Genka and the Bleater would bring from Moscow tomorrow and what dishes he would be able to cook.

At last, with his mind on the morrow's breakfast, Kit, too, fell asleep.

Chapter 8

NIKOLAI, LONGSHANKS' BROTHER

When Misha woke up, the rays of the early morning sun were struggling through the holes in the tent. There was a smell of dry fir branches, which served the children for beds.

Misha thrust his watch beneath the tent flap. What? Only half past four! Perhaps the watch had stopped? He brought it up to his ear and heard the measured ticking. He tried to go to sleep again and drew his blanket closer up to his chin. But disquieting thoughts kept entering his mind, and of all the worries that now beset him as the leader of the troop the greatest concerned Igor and Seva.

After an ineffectual attempt to fall asleep, he got up and picked his way out of the tent, stepping carefully over his sleeping comrades.

The glade was bathed in clear, cold morning light. The twittering of birds came from the tops of the trees. Yura Palitsin, one of the sentries, was walking near the flag-staff, lazily dragging his feet. The second sentry, Sasha Cuban, was sleeping against the trunk of a tree. Just as he had thought—they were sleeping by turn! On duty! Fine sentries they were. Misha stole up to Cuban and gave him a fillip on the head. Cuban jumped to his feet and stared wide-eyed at Misha.

"Sentries don't sleep," Misha whispered impressively.

Then he went round the camp. Everything was in order. It wanted two hours before reveille. He could still put in some sleep. But since he was already up there was no point going back to bed. A swim would be just the thing to dispel his drowsiness.

The air over the river was moist and cold. The sharp-tipped, closed lily buds were sticking out of the water amid broad green leaves. The bank was wet with dew.

Misha undressed, dived into the icy water and swam to the other bank. He swam across the narrow but deep river three times before he got warm. But when he climbed out on to the bank, he felt cold again. With teeth chattering, he hopped about on one leg for a long time, trying to get the other leg into his trousers.

Looking up he saw two men approaching the river. They were Nikolai Ribalin, the brother of Longshanks, and Kuzmin, an elderly, sullen-looking, bearded peasant from the village. The men were walking to the tiny cove where a few simple village boats were resting motionless on the water.

Nikolai's face broke into a smile when he saw Misha and he gave him a

friendly wave of his hand. About twenty-five years of age, tall, thin and bony, he had an old, strapless army greatcoat thrown across his shoulders. But his face, which was also thin and bony, with prominent cheek-bones, a long sharp nose, and thin, pale lips, was good-natured and friendly.

"The water's probably cold for a dip," Nikolai remarked.

"It is," Misha admitted.

For want of something better to do, Misha followed the men to the boats.

Kuzmin had some trouble with the lock. Nikolai rolled a cigarette and silently contemplated Misha. For some reason he was smiling, perhaps because he had met Misha or because the day promised to be fine.

"Nikolai," Misha said, "remember, you promised to help us today at the club."

"Yes," Nikolai said. "I'll be there, but first I have to go to Khalzin Meadow with Sevastyanovich here." "Don't let us down." Kuzmin finally opened the lock and threw the chain down on the bottom of the boat.

Nikolai got into the boat and said:

"Is there any reason why I should let you down? That wouldn't do, would it?"

Kuzmin followed him into the boat and with his foot against the seat pushed off with an oar.

Kuzmin was in a shirt without a belt, hempen trousers, and short, worn boots that resembled overshoes.

That was how Misha remembered him—a sullen-looking, bearded, dishevelled peasant with one foot on the seat of the boat, pushing away from the bank with an oar.

"We'll be waiting for you at the club," Misha called out.

Nikolai smiled again to show that he would keep his word.

Chapter 9

IN THE VILLAGE

After breakfast Genka and the Bleater set out for the station. Korovin went with them—to meet Boris Sergeyevich, the headmaster of the children's home.

Zina Kruglova's section, which was detailed for kitchen duty that day, stayed behind in the camp.

The rest of the children, headed by Misha and Slava, went to the village.

The village sprawled at the foot of a mountain, close to the riverside. The log houses with their board or thatched roofs stood on either side of a long, wide street. White willows grew around the gardens. The rich peasants lived in two-storeyed houses resting on redbrick foundations, while the house of the kulak Yerofeyev was built of brick. Tall, mighty oaks grew here and there in pairs or in groups of three. Yellow shavings were strewn about on the ground near the frameworks of new houses built of fresh-hewn logs.

With the bugler in front, the troop marched down the street and halted before the Village Soviet. Behind it was a long, empty shed. That was the future club.



Attracted by the bugle and the marching troop, village boys and girls came running from all directions. The older children edged in closer, the younger ones kept at a distance; sucking fingers and goggling their eyes, they watched the Young Pioneers, although this was not the first time they had seen them.

Inexplicably, Longshanks was not among them.

"Why haven't you cut any fir branches for the club?" Misha asked.

"We went to the woods in the morning, but he frightened us off with his whirring and chirring," replied a small, black-haired boy who went by the nickname of the Fly.

"Who do you mean?"

"The wood-goblin, of course."

The Young Pioneers burst out laughing.

The Fly looked about him fearfully, then said:

"Don't laugh. It's a sin to laugh."

"You're not afraid to go to the woods for firewood, brushwood or mushrooms, I suppose," put in Kit, who had had to let somebody else do kitchen duty this time.

The Fly nodded.

"But that's another matter. The wood-goblin does not get angry when we do that and keeps silent. But, you see, he won't give, that is, doesn't allow us to take anything for the club."

"We'll do it without his permission," Misha said. "Slava, take your section to the woods and bring back some fir branches, and in the meantime we'll open the library."

They were kept busy for a long time. Some of the children returned the books they had read, others ran home to fetch books, and still others wanted to borrow new books and keep the ones they had already borrowed a little

longer. They took even more time choosing the books. Each leafed through his book, then through the one chosen by his neighbour and of course wanted his neighbour's book. Picture-books were in the greatest demand.

Two more boys came up. One of them, fat, big-faced, with a tiny nose, was Senka, son of the kulak Yerofeyev. The second was a tall, lumpish, sixteen-year-old lad known in the village as Blockhead Akimka. He was Senka Yerofeyev's devoted friend and flunkey although he was a poor peasant's son.

"Ah!" Senka shouted. "Young Pioneers, heads full of iron, bodies full of lead, godless devils!" Then with a smile that was at once ingratiating and impudent, he addressed Misha:

"How about letting me have something to read?"

"If you like. But not that one. Vera's taking it."

Misha coolly took the book from Senka's hands and returned it to Vera.

"Think I care, snotty-nosed little girl!" Senka sneered. Then he asked spitefully, "Why are there so few of you? Have the others run away?"

"They're in the camp," Misha replied.

"We've heard that story before," Senka said, turning to Blockhead Akimka. "I'll tell you where they are, they've gone home. You'll never get them back."

"And that makes you happy," the Fly noted reproachfully.

"You shut your mouth!" Senka snarled at the Fly. "You'd better give me back my raft or I'll tear your head off!"

"I never took your raft."

"You're lying. You and Longshanks took it. You don't have your own, so you steal other people's, you bunch of thieves!"

Beginning to guess a thing or two, Misha asked:

"What's this raft you're talking about?"

"Longshanks and the Fly stole my raft," Senka said angrily.

"They stole it, the blackguards, and won't say where they're hiding it. Thieves!"

"Why do you think they did it?"

"Who else? Longshanks is a thief. His brother killed Kuzmin. Murdered him. He'll sweat for it in gaol now."

"What brother? What Kuzmin?" Misha asked, unable to understand what Senka was saying.

With the joyful surprise of a gossip, Senka stared at Misha.

"Haven't you heard?"

"No, I...."

"Well, then, Nikolai, that is, Longshanks' brother, murdered Kuzmin," Senka said, making a terrible face. "Kuzmin was from our village. He was shot. How is it you haven't heard about it? The whole village's been there already. And the doctor came and the militia. They've been taken to town, both the dead Kuzmin and Nikolai, that bandit."

"When did this happen and where?" Misha asked with inexpressible concern.

"This morning. In Khalzin Meadow. Nikolai shot him there and hid the

boat somewhere. And he an activist! All of them, activists, are bandits!"

"But where's Longshanks?"

"Search me. At home, I suppose. He's probably ashamed to look people in the eyes and is hiding at home. And you, Young Pioneers and Komsomols, don't know a thing. Come on, Akimka."

They walked away with a waddling gait, chewing sunflower seeds. Stunned by what he had just heard, Misha watched them in bewilderment. Could Senka have lied to him?

But the Fly murmured dismally:

"It's all true. Nikolai's been arrested and they've taken him away to town. In a cart."

Misha told Slava to take the troop into the club and ran to Longshanks' home.

Chapter 10

MURDER

Only now did Misha notice the excitement in the village.

People were standing in groups and there was a big and noisy crowd near the co-operative shop. By the general animation it was obvious they were discussing the murder. People found it hard to believe that the murderer was Nikolai. There was something mysterious about the whole business. They felt that this kind and friendly young man could not have killed Kuzmin. Misha had seen Nikolai and Kuzmin only a few hours ago and had spoken to them. In his mind's eye he saw them now: Nikolai in the old strapless army greatcoat, Kuzmin in his worn boots pushing off with an oar. The morning had been so peaceful, with the first rays of the sun, a fresh breeze on the river, lilies between green leaves.... Misha was sure that Nikolai was not guilty. It was a mistake, a terrible mistake. Nikolai certainly could have had no motive for killing Kuzmin. Misha could not believe it. He remembered how Senka Yerofeyev had gloated over the words, "All activists are bandits."

The Ribalins lived on the edge of the village in a rickety hut with a thatched roof. The ends of the thin rafters stuck out criss-cross over the roof. Two tiny windows gave out on a mound of carried earth. The door, made of boards roughly nailed together, led into a cold passage where hung yokes and bridles although the Ribalins, the poorest of the poor peasants, had neither a horse nor a cow.

"Good morning," Misha said, entering the hut.

Longshanks' mother, Maria Ivanovna, a thin woman with an emaciated face, was lighting a fire in the stove on which stood a black, cast-iron pot. Without straightening up, she turned her head at the sound of Misha's voice, gave him a blank stare and again gave her attention to the stove.

Longshanks also gave Misha an apathetic glance and looked away.

The hard-packed earthen floor bore traces of a broom. The rough deal

table was marked with white lines left by the knife it was scraped with. Along the walls there were dark, worn, smooth benches, which had seen service for many a decade. A small, faded icon with two dry twigs beneath it hung in the front corner. On the opposite wall were a portrait of Lenin and a placard depicting a Red Army soldier running his bayonet through all the Whiteguard generals at once: Denikin and Yudenich, Baron Wrangel and Admiral Kolchak. The soldier was a giant of a man, while the generals were puny and evil-looking and they dangled crazily on the bayonet.

"Why aren't you at the club?" Misha asked, sitting down beside Longshanks.

Longshanks looked at his mother and made no reply.

"Let's go," Misha said, indicating the door with his head.

"Our Nikolai's been arrested," Longshanks said, his lips trembling.

"So I heard," Misha replied. "I saw Nikolai and Kuzmin this morning. They were getting into their boat."

Maria Ivanovna, who had been turning the pot with oven prongs, suddenly said:

"They might have quarrelled for all I know. But I don't believe Nikolai killed him. He never harmed a fly. And they had nothing to quarrel about. Nikolai never had a revolver."

She let the oven prongs drop on the floor and covered her face with her hands to hide her tears.

"He was in the army for four years. Just as life was picking up.... And now this terrible thing, this terrible misfortune."

Shaking with grief, she repeated, "This is terrible, terrible."

"You must go to town and see a lawyer," Misha said.

Maria Ivanovna wiped her eyes with her apron.

"Lawyers cost money. Where are we to get it from?"

"You don't need money. You can get free legal advice in town. At the House of the Peasant. Besides, I'm sure Nikolai will be acquitted. You'll see."

Maria Ivanovna sighed heavily and again turned to her pots and oven prongs.

Misha gazed at her hunched back, the thin, weary back of a woman farm labourer, at the silent Longshanks, at the humble furnishings in the poor hut, and his heart contracted with pity and compassion for these people who had been struck unexpectedly by such terrible grief. Although Misha did not for a moment doubt that Nikolai was innocent and that he would be released, he realized how difficult it was for Maria Ivanovna and Longshanks. They were alone in the world, ashamed to face the people in the village.

"The militiaman," Maria Ivanovna said, "asked Nikolai, 'Did you kill him?' 'No, I didn't.' 'Who did?' 'I don't know.' 'Strange you don't.' 'I don't, that's the truth. We measured the meadow and then I left.' 'Why did you go off alone?' 'Because Kuzmin went on to the Khalzan.'"

"What's this Khalzan?" Misha asked.

"A small river," Longshanks explained. "More like a creek. And the meadow is called Khalzin."

"Well, and Nikolai," Maria Ivanovna continued, "says to him, 'Kuzmin went on to the Khalzan. He's got some fish-baskets there. I had almost reached the village when I saw people running to fetch me. They said Kuzmin had been killed. I ran back with them and indeed there was Kuzmin lying dead.' 'Who shot him?' 'I don't know.' 'Where's the boat?' 'I don't know.' And instead of finding out what's what the militiaman says, 'You're clever at making up stories.' "

Misha tried to picture the meadow, the dead Kuzmin, Nikolai, the crowd milling round them, the militiaman. Perhaps bandits were lurking in the woods. Misha thought of Igor and Seva. Had they been killed too? He put the thought out of his mind.

Misha did not want to leave Longshanks and Maria Ivanovna alone, but Korovin and his headmaster had probably come from the station already. He had to return to the camp.

"The main thing is not to worry," he said, getting up, "everything will clear up. Nikolai will be back in a day or two. I'm sure he was only taken to town as a witness."

"No," Maria Ivanovna sighed, "you won't prove the truth so quickly."

Chapter 11

THE "COUNTESS"

The headmaster of the children's home, Boris Sergeyevich, turned out to be quite a young man. Tall, round-shouldered, he was in a Red Army tunic, cavalry riding-breeches and dusty brown boots. But what surprised Misha was that a military-looking man like him should wear glasses. That jarred somehow.

The glasses made the young headmaster appear stern, even crusty. He cast a sidelong and, as Misha thought, disapproving glance at the tents, as though he did not like the camp and everything about it. That touched Misha to the quick. His appointment as leader had made him testy. It seemed to him that adults treated him with a patronizing manner and not at all as though he were a real troop leader. Avoiding Boris Sergeyevich's eyes, he went on reprimanding Zina for allowing her section to be late with the dinner. Boris Sergeyevich might be a headmaster, but he, Misha, was a leader, the leader of the troop and the head of this camp.

On the way to the manor, Misha became convinced that nothing the headmaster saw here pleased him. Boris Sergeyevich missed nothing and his silence was so meaningful that Misha felt as if he were to blame for the neglected state of the manor grounds.

They saw the "countess" the moment they turned into the central walk. She was standing motionless on the porch, her head held high, in the same poise Misha and Korovin had seen her when they had watched her from the stables. She seemed to be waiting for them and it certainly required nerve to go up close to that statuelike figure.

They stopped at the bottom of the stairs. But the old woman made no move to come down to them. Thus they stood silent and motionless: the old woman at the top of the stairs, the headmaster and the boys at the bottom.

Calmly and with the disapproval that Misha had come to recognize, Boris Sergeyevich gazed at the old woman, at her face framed in grey hair, aquiline nose and ash-coloured eyebrows. Misha saw that the "countess" was beginning to quail before that stare, that her big round eyes were filling with alarm and hatred.

The longer Misha watched this scene, the more he came to like Boris Sergeyevich's self-assurance and composure. The strange part of it was that Korovin, too, comported himself as though this woman was not there at all.



At last, the old woman asked:

"What can I do for you?"

"Would you please come down," said Boris Sergeyevich in the tone of a school-teacher who knows he will be obeyed.

The old woman went down a few steps and stopped, two or three steps above Boris Sergeyevich and the boys.

Then she haughtily said:

"I am listening."

There was no reply. Boris Sergeyevich did not seem to see her. Misha was delighted with his self-control. This was what a real leader should be like! Says nothing, not a word, only gives orders. This was a model to take after!

Boris Sergeyevich spoke only after the "countess" had taken a few more steps and was on the same level with him.

"I am the headmaster of Children's Home No. 116. Would you please tell me who you are?"

"The curator of this estate."

"Splendid. We are planning to establish a children's labour commune here. I should like to see the house."

The old woman suddenly shut her eyes. Misha felt his heart miss a beat because he thought she would drop down dead. But nothing of the sort happened. She kept her eyes closed for a few moments, then opened them

and said:

"This house is a historical monument. I have a safeguard for it."

"Let me see it," Boris Sergeyevich said dryly.

The old woman drew a paper from under her shawl, held it for a moment, then handed it to Boris Sergeyevich.

He took it and, wrinkling his brows as was his wont, began to read.

Craning his neck over Boris Sergeyevich's shoulder, Misha glanced at the paper.

In the top left corner it had a large overspreading seal that looked like a blot made with violet ink. The text was typewritten. SAFEGUARD was printed in capital letters, and below that, in ordinary letters, it read: "This is to certify that as a historical monument the manor in the former estate of Karagayevo is under the protection of the State. No organization or individual may use the manor without special permission from the Gubernia Department of Public Education. Violation of this safeguard will be regarded as damage to valuable state property and will entail punishment in accordance with the laws of the Republic. *Serov, Deputy Director of the Gubernia Department of Public Education.*"

"All correct," Boris Sergeyevich said, returning the paper, "but a commune will be organized here all the same."

"You have no business ordering me around," the old woman said with a toss of her head, "and I would ask you not to bother me again."

She turned, went up the stairs and disappeared behind the tall oaken door.

Boris Sergeyevich walked round the manor, then inspected the sheds, the stables, the pond and the fields beyond the manor. Korovin, too, gazed long and attentively at the fields. Then Boris Sergeyevich said:

"Landlords near Moscow in the sixth year of the Revolution. Amazing!"



Before leaving the grounds, Boris Sergeyevich turned and looked at the manor again. The boys stopped too. In the dazzling rays of the setting sun, the bronze bird shone as though it were made of gold. If looked down with

round, wicked eyes and seemed ready to tear off its perch and swoop down on them.

"A very striking bird," Boris Sergeyevich observed.

"Just an ordinary eagle," Misha said.

"You think so?" Boris Sergeyevich replied with, as it seemed to Misha, a shade of doubt in his voice.

Chapter 12

PLANS

Boris Sergeyevich and Korovin took the train to Moscow. Genka and the Bleater were due in an hour. Although Misha still hoped they had found the fugitives in Moscow, he could not help feeling that it was Igor and Seva who had taken Senka's raft and gone down the river on it. Still, you could never tell.

Genka and the Bleater arrived and announced that Igor and Seva were not in Moscow.

Genka pretended he was very tired though it was the Bleater who had carried both sacks. He had shouldered one of them only when they were nearing the camp to show that he had done his share.

The boys had brought quite a lot of bread: quarter and half loaves and even two whole loaves.

"I insisted on outside pieces," Genka boasted. "When anybody tried to give me the middle, I said I couldn't take it because the bread was not properly baked and could cause stomach trouble." He accompanied his words with theatrical gestures.

Kit, who was inspecting the contents of the sacks, drew out a few bags of groats, a packet of dried fruit and some flour. The flour brought him visions of pancakes.

"These groats will last us for a long time," Genka held forth. "Sparingly used, they'll last us till the end of the summer if Kit doesn't eat them raw. Our weak point is sugar. Nobody coughed up with that. But there are some sweets."

Misha ordered the sweets, which had got stuck together, to be counted and rationed out two a day to each member of the troop: for the morning and evening tea.

Meanwhile Kit, who was continuing his inspection, produced a piece of pork fat, a packet of herring, butter wrapped in wax-paper, and about two dozen hard-boiled eggs.

In addition, Genka handed Misha a sum of money—thirty-eight roubles.

"Quite a good haul," Misha noted approvingly. "So you see, Genka, what it means to send you."

Genka wanted to announce whose parents had given what, but Misha stopped him.

"This is a pool and it is not important to know who contributed to it. The

moment the supplies are in the sack they belong to the troop. Better tell us what you learned at Igor's and Seva's."

"We went to Seva's mother," Genka began, "and after we had said good morning I told her that we had come for supplies. She wanted to know how Seva was doing and I said that he was all right and having a lot of fun. Then she asked, 'When is he planning to come home?' I said he'd be home very soon. She seemed surprised so I told her he would be coming for books. 'Very well,' she said, 'give him my love.' We said good-bye and left. About the same thing happened at Igor's."

"About, but not the same," interjected the Bleater, the fighter for truth and justice.

"Here it comes," Genka muttered.

"What happened at Igor's?" Misha demanded, suspecting that Genka had got into some sort of trouble.

"As soon as we left Seva's mother," the Bleater began, "Genka said, 'There's something fishy about the way Seva's mother spoke to us. I have a feeling that Seva is at home, hiding from us, and that he told his mother to keep mum about it. We'll be cleverer at Igor's. They won't take us in so easily.' I warned him that he'd spoil everything. I warned you, didn't I?"

"Get it off your chest and be done with it," Genka said gloomily "I'll have my say later."

"Well, then," the Bleater went on, "when we arrived at Igor's only his grandmother was in—his mother was away at work. 'Now watch me twist her round my little finger,' Genka whispered to me. I tried to stop him, but he wouldn't listen and said, 'Hello, we've come to see Igor.' The grandmother replied, 'Igor is not at home, he is in the camp.' Then Genka winked at her and said, 'Don't be afraid of us. We've run away from the camp, too. We must see Igor and plan what to do next.' The grandmother stared at us, obviously not understanding what Genka was talking about, but he kept on, 'Now tell us quickly where we can find Igor, we're in a hurry.' The old lady became speechless, gulped, then began to wail, 'Good gracious! That means our poor little Igor has run away from the camp! Where has he gone to? Where is he? What are we to do? His mother must be told right away! We must run to the militia!' Isn't that right, Genka, isn't that how it was?"

"Yes, yes, go on with the story."

"When Genka saw what he'd done, he naturally lost his nerve and said he had made it all up. I, too, tried to persuade her that Genka had meant it as a joke, saying that if Igor had really run away we wouldn't be asking for his share of the supplies. Between us we managed to calm the old lady down. But I'm sure she'll tell Igor's mother. You'll see!"

"You've got no sense of responsibility, Genka," Misha said with exasperation. "You can't be trusted with anything. As though it were not enough that Igor and Seva have run away because of you, you had to go and get their parents worried. And you were warned not to do it! This is the last straw! We'll first find Igor and Seva and then demote you."

"That's not fair," Genka grumbled plaintively. "I am a Komsomol and

I've been appointed...."

"All the more that you are a Komsomol. It's disgraceful! You make a mess of everything you're asked to do."

Chapter 13

THE ANARCHIST

Misha was sure the fugitives were somewhere along the river, for now there could no longer be any doubt that they had gone on Senka's raft. Downstream, naturally, for there was no sense in going against the current.

The problem now was to get a raft or a boat. There was no raft available and even if there were, a raft was too slow. The alternative was to find a boat. They could get one at the boat station, but the boatman would be sure to ask a price they could not pay.

Some of the people in the village had boats, but it was useless to ask them. One of the boats had caught Misha's eye. Although a pair-oar affair and absurdly painted, it was not very big and was fast and light. It belonged to a strange person, an artist, who lived in the village with his mother and called himself an anarchist. Misha did not know what his anarchism consisted in. He had seen him once or twice in the street and on those occasions the artist had been drunk and had shouted some unintelligible words. He was a short, blue-eyed man of about thirty, always unshaven and always in a state of intoxication.

Longshanks, Misha felt, was the only person who could help get the boat from the artist. Misha decided to see if he could enlist Longshanks' help especially as he had made up his mind to take him along in the search for Igor and Seva. No one knew the river, the woods and the surrounding villages better than he. Besides, Longshanks would want to go, for they would pass Khalzin Meadow and nobody could tell what might happen: they might even get on the track of Kuzmin's murderers. If they did, Nikolai would be released. That argument won Longshanks over. He agreed to accompany Misha and go to the anarchist to ask for the loan of the boat.

"His name is Kondraty Stepanovich and he is an artist," Longshanks said. "He has any number of pictures and his whole hut is covered with paintings. If he's tight he won't give us a chance to say a word, if he's got a hangover—he'll chase us away, but if he's sober—there is a chance he'll let us have the boat."

The first thing that struck Misha in the hut of the village artist was the mixed smell of sheepskins, drying oil, oil paints, home-made vodka, pickle, and cabbage soup which had turned sour. The hut was quite roomy, but it was full of things peasants usually did not have: an easel, boxes of paint, and ancient furniture that had probably been brought from Moscow.

But the most amazing thing was that the hut itself and all the objects in it were painted so fantastically that it was bewildering.



The walls were of different colours: one was green, another was yellow, the third blue and it was hard to define the colour of the fourth. The stove was covered with multi-coloured little squares, rhombuses and triangles. The floors were painted yellow, and the ceiling—red. The benches along the walls were brown. The window-frames were white. Even the oven prongs were painted in different colours, while the poker had a coat of red paint. The city furniture alone retained its natural colour, but it was evident that it too would come in for a taste of the artist's enterprising brush.

The artist himself was sitting on a bench and whittling something with an air of concentration. His hair was thinning at the temples but it was long at the back of his head and hung in red shaggy locks on the dandruff-covered collar of his velveteen Tolstoyan shirt. The shirt was quite threadbare and was smeared with paint of every conceivable colour. Around his neck was a dirty cloth tied in a bow. When the boys entered he raised his dull, blue eyes for a moment and then resumed his work.

"We've come to see you, Kondraty Stepanovich," Longshanks said.

"What for?" the artist demanded in a low, rumbling bass which was unexpected in such a small and puny-looking man.

"This is the leader of the troop," Longshanks said, pointing at Misha.

The artist again raised his head. His eyes stopped on Misha's Komsomol badge.

"A Komsomol?"

"Yes," Misha replied.

"Do you know who I am?"

"An artist."

"I'm talking about my political convictions."

"I don't know," Misha replied, doing his best to stifle his laughter.

"By conviction I am an anarchist-maximalist," Kondraty Stepanovich declared pompously.

"We wanted to ask you to lend us your boat for two days," Misha said.

"Anarchist-maximalists," Kondraty Stepanovich said, "do not recognize authority. We are neutral so far as Soviet rule is concerned. We do not believe in experiments, but we do not hinder them. So that's that." He had nothing more to add about his political views, so he repeated, "That's that," and returned to his whittling.

"But will you let us have the boat?" Misha asked.

"What do you want it for?"

"We have to go downriver," Misha replied evasively.

"Anarchists disapprove of property," Kondraty Stepanovich said floridly. "What made you think the boat was mine?"

"That is what people say," Misha replied with a shrug.

"They don't know what they're talking about. They are saying that because they are so used to property. Everything belongs to the community."

"Does that mean we may take the boat?"

"Take it," Kondraty Stepanovich said without looking up.

"Thank you!" Misha cried joyfully. "We'll return it intact."

"Ask for the key," Longshanks whispered, nudging Misha.

"Please may we have the key to the boat," Misha said.

"The key? Now that's a different matter."

"Why?" Misha asked worriedly, beginning to realize that it was not so simple to get the boat as it had seemed at first.

"The key is my private property."

"I don't understand."

"The boat is common property and you may use it, but the key belongs to me and I am in my rights if I choose not to give it to you."

"Then what are we to do? Break the lock?"

"That would be ex-pro-pri-ation!" Kondraty Stepanovich said, shaking his head sadly. "It must be done in public."

"We'll have the whole troop down as witnesses," Misha said quickly.

"The militia will arrest you."

"But you don't recognize the militia," Misha noted.

"We don't recognize them," the artist said in a cheerless tone "but they recognize us."

"If we had the money, we'd pay you for the boat," Misha admitted.

Kondraty Stepanovich energetically shook his head.

"Anarchist-maximalists do not recognize bank-notes." After a pause, he added, "But barter would be all right."

"Barter?"

"Yes. I shall give you the key and in return you will give me your contract to paint the club."

"What contract?" Misha asked in surprise.

"For the club you are fixing up. It has to be painted. Well, I shall do that."

"But we're not getting paid for what we're doing."

"A pity." The artist's head drooped. "Labour must be remunerated."

"But you've just said that anarchists don't recognize money," Misha said.

"I did not say paid but remunerated," the artist explained.

"The fellows will weed your potato patch for you, Kondraty Stepanovich," offered the practical Longshanks.

"That would be exploitation," the artist said, thoughtfully moving his lips.

"Nothing of the sort!" Misha protested. "You invested your labour in the boat and we'll help you with our labour."

"Put that way, I suppose it's all right," Kondraty Stepanovich mused aloud. "When will you weed the patch? It will have to be done soon." He looked out of the window which opened on a weed-overgrown kitchen-garden.

"As soon as we return," Misha replied. "In about two days."

"All right then, but I want you to reconsider what I said about the club. If I do the job, it will be the envy of all the clubs in Moscow."

He took a rusty key off the wall and gave it to Misha.

"All right," Misha said happily, putting the key in his pocket. "We'll think about it."

"The oars!" Longshanks again nudged him.

"Where are the oars?" Misha asked.

"The oars . . ." Kondraty Stepanovich said sadly. Misha thought with fright that the artist would again begin a discussion about private property and would not give them the oars.

"The oars and the row-locks. Otherwise the boat will be useless to us," Misha said resolutely.

"And the row-locks." Kondraty Stepanovich sighed.

He very much wanted to continue the conversation, but evidently remembered about the weeding and about the club and only sighed again and said:

"They are in the shed. See that you put them back."

Chapter 14

ALWAYS PREPARED!

Misha decided to leave Zina Kruglova in charge of the camp. Genka could not be depended upon, Slava was irresolute, but Zina, though she was only a girl, was respected and even held in awe by all the children.

But not to offend Genka and Slava, Misha told them they would go with him. Together with Longshanks that would make four; two at the oars, one at the rudder, and one on the bow as the look-out.

Returning to camp, Misha ordered Genka to get all the equipment and Slava to see to the supplies.

"We'll be gone for two days," Misha said. "Genka, look the boat over and see that there's no leak and that the oars fit into the row-locks. Make a pole and take a spare oar. Take a pair of fishing-rods. Don't forget a compass, an axe, rope, a pail, a pot, a torch with spare batteries, and two signal flags.

Each of us will need a whistle."

"What about a tent?"

"We shan't need one. We'll sleep in the open. Yes, and don't forget matches. That's about all. Have you written it down?"

"Yes," Genka said, underlining every item on the list.

Misha turned to Slava.

"Now you, Slava," he said, "Divide the supplies into two bags in case we'll have to separate. Take a mug, a spoon and a knife for each. Now about the supplies. A loaf of bread, noodles for two meals, groats for two meals, some butter, tea and eight sweets. That's all, I think."

"We'll starve," Genka grumbled. "What do you say we take some eggs and pork fat?"

"No. We'll leave that for the troop. We'll catch fish on the way. And don't forget salt."

"I think we could take some potatoes," Slava suggested.

"That's an idea," Misha agreed. "But remember: no paper packets. Use sacks. In general, everything's got to be packed so that nothing creaks or clatters and, what is most important, so that nothing tinkles or bangs. Understand? Genka, grease the row-locks and take some sacking in case we have to muffle the oars."

"Don't worry, Misha," Genka said, "I'll see to everything."

"Naturally, we'll follow your orders," Slava said soberly, "but, honestly, I don't think anything will come of all this."

"You're always doubting," Genka said angrily.

"Seva and Igor have two days' start over us," Slava insisted, "and we'll never catch up with them."

"Not catch up with those lubbers?" Genka shouted.

"In the first place," Misha said, "they're on a raft, while we have a boat, which is three times as fast. Second, they have to stop frequently to buy food, find out where they are, and will probably sleep until midday. Third, you don't suppose they'll stay on the river for ever. They must stop somewhere and change to a train. That means they'll leave the raft. We'll find it and it will be the starting point for our search."

"Does that make it clear to you now?" Genka said in a mocking tone. "If not, stay behind and help Kit cook porridge."

The preparations were finished by evening. The supplies were stowed aboard the boat, which had been given a check and brought closer to the camp. Two of the boys were detailed to guard it. The departure was set for four o'clock in the morning. Longshanks remained to spend the night in the camp so as not to be late.

In the evening, when the troop were sitting round the fire, Misha appealed to their consciousness, exhorting them to obey Zina.

"We're living in difficult times. I'll say nothing about the international situation, everybody knows about that. But even here the situation is disturbing. Seva and Igor have run away. And then there is this mysterious

murder. For all we know there may be bandits in the woods. And the manor with that old woman in it is also very suspicious. We must be vigilant. Above all, we must have discipline."

To strengthen the impression made by these words Zina Kruglova added:

"That old-regime countess might take it into her head to set fire to the manor to prevent the commune from getting it."

"And very simply, too," Misha said with the sole purpose of sustaining Zina's prestige. He did not believe the old woman would burn the manor down.

"To think that one person is occupying a huge house like that," Genka shouted. "There's room for two hundred kids. It's a shame!"

"True," Slava agreed. "But how does that concern Igor and Seva? The manor, the murder of Kuzmin—what have Igor and Seva got to do with all that?"

"By the fact that there's a class struggle going on," Misha said didactically. "Understand? People are not killed for nothing. And the countess, I'm sure, is waiting for the landlords and counts to come back. She's looking after the estate for them."

Slava shook his head sceptically and said:

"I don't think anybody is hoping the old regime is re-established."

"That's where you're wrong," Misha said.

"The kulaks in the village," Longshanks interposed, "say all sorts of things. Now this English lord what's his name...."

"Lord Curzon," Misha prompted.

"That's the man. Well this Curzon sent Lenin a letter."

"An ultimatum."

"The kulaks are saying that that will put an end to Soviet power."

"Stuff and nonsense," Genka cried. "Your kulaks will never see Soviet power overthrown. Neither will the countess, nor her White émigré count!"

"Curzon presented insolent demands," Misha said. "He went too far. He wants us to recall our representatives from Iran and Afghanistan. The cheek of the man! The English capitalists are afraid their colonies will no longer want to be colonies. Get it? The peoples of the East! Here, Slava, read us what it says in the newspaper Genka brought from Moscow today."

Slava opened the newspaper. In the left-hand corner were the words: "Workers of all countries, unite!" and in the right-hand corner: "Read and pass it on."

Slava read aloud the reports about the Curzon ultimatum and about the demonstrations of protest against the ultimatum under the slogan "Hands Off Soviet Russia!"

"You see? We have the support of the workers throughout the world," Misha explained. "And nothing the capitalists do can harm us."

"They're also saying that Lenin is very ill," Longshanks said pensively.

"What of it if he is ill? He overworked himself and so fell ill. Listen...." Misha took the newspaper from Slava and read aloud: " 'Resolution of workers of the State Administration for the Issue of Bank-Notes.... Allow Vladimir Ilyich three months' leave and demand that he implicitly obeys his

doctors' orders so that he should recover his health for the weal of the working people.' Is that clear?" Misha said, folding the newspaper. "Lenin will rest and recuperate. So let your kulaks stop rejoicing. You know what?" he suddenly cried as the thought entered his head. "Everybody is writing to Lenin. Why shouldn't we write a letter too?"

Surprise was expressed on every face. What could they write Lenin?

But Misha was carried away by his idea. Forgetting that he had resolved to be as calm and imperturbable as Boris Sergeyevich, the headmaster of the children's home, he sprang to his feet and, waving his arms, said:

"We'll write and tell him to get well quickly."

"That's right," Genka seconded him. "Everybody is writing."

"Even if Lenin doesn't read our letter," Zina said, "he'll be told about it. It'll be pleasant for him to know that everybody is thinking about him, loves him and wishes him health."

Whooping and interrupting each other, the children finally composed a letter to Vladimir Ilyich Lenin:

"Dear Ilyich. We Young Pioneers and Komsomols send you our heartfelt proletarian greetings. We want you to get well quickly. We want to fight for the workers' cause as you have fought all your life. We are always prepared to defend and strengthen Soviet Russia. Get well quickly, our dear Ilyich."





Part II

PURSUIT

Chapter 15

THE BOAT STATION

With one foot against the bank that was slippery with dew, Misha gave the boat a shove, jumped into it and scrambled to the bow.

They were off!

A white mist shrouded the river. The banks were barely visible. The broom shrubs reached out almost to the middle of the river, their thick branches nearly touching the water. Genka and Slava just missed scraping their oars against them. But Longshanks, who was sitting in the stern, skilfully steered the boat along the narrow, meandering river.

Misha took note of the time. Eight kilometres an hour would bring them to the mouth of the river towards evening. It was seventy or eighty kilometres away.

With these thoughts running through his mind, Misha kept a sharp look-out. At this early, predawn hour, it was hard to recognize the landmarks. Everything had become huge, bottomless, mysterious, eerie: the trees, whose crowns could not be seen, looked unexpectedly tall, the shrubbery seemed to be impassable. Misha could not tell if they had passed the little promontory beyond which the boat station stood. Had he missed it in the darkness?

He raised himself. Just then they went round the promontory. At once it grew brighter. Misha saw the tiny boat station. At the same moment, he

noticed a woman approaching the hut. He recognized her. It was the "countess." What was she doing there at such an unearthly hour?

"Quiet! Stop rowing!" Misha hurriedly whispered. Genka and Slava feathered oars and the boat slowed down. Misha seized hold of a branch and pulled the boat into the shadow of a nut-tree. From there he had a good view of the boat station.

The mist still hung in the air. The people near the hut looked like vague shadows. The silhouette of a horse harnessed to a heavy cart loomed beyond the hut. And perhaps because the hut was so tiny, the horse and cart seemed to be enormous.

On the bank were the "countess" and the kulak Yerofeyev, a short, misshapen old man in a black cap and iron-rimmed glasses.

The boatman, Dmitry Petrovich, was doing something in the boat, then he straightened up and climbed to the bank. He was about thirty, of medium stature, agile and strong. Not that Misha was afraid of him, but whenever he was with him he felt uncomfortable: even though the man always smiled when he saw Misha there was something insincere and sly about him. He walked about barefoot, in a sateen shirt without a belt. But his face was closely shaved, well-cared for and quite unlike a peasant's, with a narrow, sharp-tipped moustache.

Yerofeyev and the boatman went to the cart. Somebody hopped down from it. The boys peered into the gloom—it was Senka. Yerofeyev took a bast mat down from the cart. Then the three of them dragged two heavy sacks to the boat.

Dmitry Petrovich stepped into the boat and Yerofeyev gave it a shove. The boat rolled, moved away from the bank and, caught by the current, turned towards the middle of the river. Dmitry Petrovich steered it downstream.

Everybody watched the boat: the boys—from their hiding-place, the old woman and Yerofeyev—from the bank, and Senka—from the cart.

The boat disappeared behind a bend. Yerofeyev said a few words to the "countess" and went to the cart. Taking the reins, he turned to the "countess" and again said something. The old woman silently nodded.

The cart started off up the path along the bank leading to the village. The old woman retraced her way across a field to the manor. Her black shawl bobbed up and down amid the tall wheat. Then she was lost to sight.

Chapter 16

ON THE RIVER

Genka was the first to break the silence.

"I wonder what they took away in that boat?" he said under his breath, rising to his feet and looking hard into the distance although both the boat and the boatman were no longer to be seen. "I always thought there was something fishy about the boat station. I said so to Slava only yesterday.

Didn't I tell you I had my suspicions, Slava?"

"It wasn't yesterday, but the day before yesterday," Slava corrected him. "So far as I'm concerned, I can see nothing suspicious. There are all sorts of things that people have to transport by boat."

"Transport, 'aha!'" Genka teased him. "So early in the morning and in this slinking way. Besides, this kulak and usurer Yerofeyev and his son Senka are mixed up in it." He turned to Misha. "I vote we put Slava ashore."

"What for?"

"If we don't he'll keep putting us off the track with his doubts. He'll whimper all the time."

Misha silenced him with a gesture. But what did it all mean? What brought the "countess," the boatman and Yerofeyev together? They were taking something away at night, secretly....

"The old woman might be sending off things from the manor so that the commune would not get them," he suggested.

"What things?" Longshanks said. "There's nothing in the manor."

"What's in those sacks then?"

"How should I know?"

"All right," Misha decided. "We've got to go downstream anyway. We'll look for Igor and Seva and at the same time keep an eye on the boatman. Only be careful not to let him see us. Push off!"

Longshanks sent the boat downstream with a push against the bank. Genka and Slava bent to their oars. Misha kept the binoculars glued to his eyes but could see no sign of the boatman. He comforted himself with the thought that they would catch up with him in the end.

The little river twisted and turned through a deep and narrow valley. The high bank on their right was washed bare—porous yellow limestone rocks overhung the water and there were fantastically shaped white chalk crags. On the low-lying left bank were narrow flood-meadows and peat-bogs. The slimy bed of the river could be seen through the turbid water only where it was very shallow. The ripples forming on the surface here and there showed there were springs on the bottom.

The boys went past the village and the ferry, but still there was no sign of the boatman. Were they no match for him with their two pairs of oars? Misha signed to his friends to pull towards the bank. He got out of the boat and climbed to the top of a hillock in the hope of catching sight of the boat from there.

A wide panorama of the valley spread out before him: unbounded fields, dark woods, peaceful copses, solitary windmills, white belfries, and carts with their thills sticking skyward on the fields lying closest to him.... The sun was rising slowly and its slanting rays were pushing the gloom into the distance and tinting the countryside with bright colours. But the dark, winding waters of the river were hidden from view by the hills and the overgrowth.

Misha returned to the boat. He and Longshanks relieved Genka and Slava at the oars. Genka took charge of the tiller and Slava settled down in the bow with the binoculars.

"Let's see if we can't make the boat go faster, Longshanks," Misha said, pulling his oars with all his strength. "You, Genka, be careful how you steer."

"Don't worry, this isn't my first time," Genka replied promptly.

He made a picturesque figure in his singlet and rolled-up trousers and with the tiller oar in his hands.

"Slava," Misha continued, "keep your eyes peeled. Watch out not only for the boatman. Our chief task is to find Igor and Seva. Watch for the raft or anything else that might put us on their trail."

"There's nothing to see so far," Slava replied, "neither the boatman, nor the boys, nor the raft, nor anything else."

For half an hour they rowed with might and main and Misha was about to get Genka and Slava to take over, when Slava, who was sweeping the river with the binoculars, suddenly said:

"Quiet, chaps! I think it's the boatman."

"Where?"

Misha and Longshanks feathered oars. Genka half-rose, staring intently ahead.

"I've lost him," Slava said, turning the binoculars. "I saw a boat just beyond that bend. Ah, there he is again."

"How far away?"

"About a kilometre," Slava said indecisively.

"We're nearing Khalzin Meadow," Longshanks said in a troubled tone.

"To the bank!" Misha ordered quietly.

When he and Longshanks climbed on to the bank and surveyed the river, they saw that the boatman was not rowing. His boat was rocking on the water and he was gazing at the bank.

"He's looking at Khalzin Meadow," Longshanks whispered, turning as pale as a sheet.

"What's eating you? There's nothing to be worried about."

The boatman, his eyes fixed on the bank, was steadying his boat with his oar from time to time. It looked as though he was afraid to draw near to the spot where Kuzmin was murdered.

The strain of waiting was more than Genka could bear and he joined his friends on the bank. Now the three of them, like the boatman, gazed at Khalzin Meadow.

Grown over with bright-green grass and flooded with sunlight, the meadow stretched between the left bank of the Utcha and the right bank of the tiny and nearly dry Khalzan, which drained into the Utcha.

There was so much peace and quiet in the green monotony of the meadow that the boys thought they heard the tiresome buzzing of gnats and the sharp chirping of the grasshoppers. The meadow was quite devoid of cover. The foliage of a few solitary trees hung low over the ground. Only on the riverside was there a fairly thick overgrowth of shrubs. From where had Kuzmin been shot? Why had Nikolai not heard the shot? Who had stolen his boat? Strange....

At last, the boatman dipped his oars and his boat moved on. The boys

scrambled down the bank and started off in pursuit. Genka and Slava rowed, Misha sat in the bow and Longshanks in the stern.

They followed at a distance that allowed them to keep the boatman within range of their binoculars even when he went round one of the numerous bends. He rowed facing the boys and they had to be very careful to keep out of sight. Just before every bend, Misha leaped ashore and watched the boatman through his binoculars. In the excitement of the chase they forgot the purpose of their journey.

"We're approaching the most densely wooded places," Longshanks said. "I'll show you a path that leads to the Goligin Brushwood Road."

"You mean the road where the dead count is buried?"

"Yes."

"I never thought it was so far away."

"By river yes, but not if you go through the woods."

A long twist with a thick overgrowth again hid the boatman. Afraid to lose sight of their quarry, Misha told Genka and Slava to row faster. The boys plied their oars with a will. When their boat swung round the bend, Misha saw that he had been too hasty. About three hundred metres away from them the boatman, knee-deep in the water, was dragging his boat into a tiny cove near two white rocks. What saved the boys was that the boatman had his back to them and the water splashing about his feet prevented him from hearing the noise made by their oars.

The boys quickly drew alongside the bank and hid behind a tall tree whose branches came down to the very surface of the water. Unseen themselves, they could see the boatman.

"The path to the Goligin Brushwood Road starts from those two rocks," Longshanks whispered.

Misha signed to him to keep still.

The boatman pulled his boat out of the water, threw the chain round one of the rocks and turned into the woods.

The silence that followed was pierced by the treble scream of an owl.

Chapter 17

THE BOATMAN

It was a small and shallow cove. The thick foliage of a mighty oak sheltered it from the sun and that was why it had not dried up. From two white rocks a short path led to a nut-grove and disappeared into the woods beyond.

The boatman stood on the bank listening attentively. The boys also listened. From the depths of the woods an owl screamed in reply. Hiding behind a tree, the boys waited to see what would happen next. Bright flowers grew thickly on the edge of the woods. In the dazzling rays of the early morning sun, the tall buttercups, erect clusters of pale-yellow monkshood, white gillyflowers and gay forest bluebells merged in an

iridescent carpet which looked so restful, joyous and inviting that suddenly Misha felt his suspicions were absurd. It seemed to him that if he were to go up to the boatman, the latter would talk to him amiably, with his usual mocking, unpleasant and noncommittal smile. But this feeling of tranquil trust died as quickly as it was born. The scream of an owl again came from the woods, much nearer this time.

The boatman went up and down a stretch of the bank to make sure that it was deserted, then turned to the woods and, with a gesture of his hand, beckoned over whoever was concealed behind the trees.

Two young men with sleepy faces and dressed in peasant's winter clothing emerged from the woods; one wore a torn sheepskin jacket and the other—a long, shabby homespun coat 5 both had crumpled army caps on their heads.

The men carried the sacks into the woods. The boatman said something to them but they made no reply. He again spoke to them when he was back in his boat, but the wind carried away his words.

As soon as the boatman got into his boat, Misha realized that he and his friends had to leave their shelter. The boys quickly rowed upstream for about half a kilometre, then they turned back to meet the boatman, pretending they were out for a row. Misha hid his binoculars under his seat.

The boatman came into sight the moment they turned their boat downstream. He rowed slowly, pulling his oars well back, and each time he bent forward his sharp shoulder-blades could be seen spreading and drawing together again under his shirt.

The splashing of the boys' oars made him stop rowing and turn his head. His boat rocked on the water, swinging round gently, and by the time the boys came abreast of it, it was already in midstream, blocking their way. To avoid hitting it with their oars, the boys also stopped rowing.

Cocking his head, the boatman looked distrustfully at the boys, then unexpectedly smiled and asked:

"Going far, comrades?"

The smile spread no farther than his lips. The ends of his sharp, narrow moustache bristled diabolically, while his cold blue eyes regarded the boys fixedly, with suspicion. The boatman's smile had always repelled Misha, but now it was particularly repulsive.

"No, just taking a ride," Misha replied calmly.

With the smile still on his lips, the boatman seized hold of the boys' boat and slowly pulled it towards him.

Misha soon saw that the boatman wanted to reach the chain, so he pinned it firmly to the bottom with his foot.

His smile seemingly fixed on his lips, the boatman cast an evaluating glance at the boys. Before him sat four strong and to all intents grown-up lads. His expression showed that he was deliberating his next step.

"So Longshanks is also with you, eh?" he said.

Misha kept silent. Nobody said anything for a full minute.

The boatman held the boys' boat fast by its bow.

"I seem to know this boat," he said.

"You probably do," Misha replied. "It belongs to Kondraty Stepanovich."

"Is that so?" he said derisively, at last seizing the iron ring to which the chain was attached. "Kondraty Stepanovich you say?" he asked, and Misha felt the chain being pulled slowly.

He pressed it harder with his foot.

"Yes, Kondraty Stepanovich," he repeated, not understanding what the boatman was driving at.

"Interesting," the boatman drawled in a mocking tone of voice. "Kondraty Stepanovich went on a fishing trip this morning. In his own boat, I saw him myself."

Misha could of course have reminded him who he actually saw this morning. But that was out of the question, and he said:

"I don't know who you saw, but Kondraty Stepanovich let us use his boat and this is it."

Still smiling, the boatman shook his head.

"I see.... You ought to be ashamed of yourselves, comrades, ashamed. I would never have expected it of Komsomols."

He gave the chain another tug, but Misha held it firmly pressed to the bottom with his foot.

"What do you mean?" Misha frowned. "Why should we be ashamed of ourselves?"

"It is a bad thing when young people are liars," the boatman said reproachfully. "It's wrong to shield a criminal. I know whose boat this is."

"Whose?" Misha challenged.

"This boat belongs to Kuzmin, who was murdered here yesterday. His brother killed him," the boatman said, pointing at Longshanks. "The militia's looking for it and here you're hiding it.... Bad. Very bad."

The accusation was so ridiculous and Misha was so amazed that he forgot about the chain. Just then the boatman jerked the chain with all his strength. Misha fell and in falling tried to catch hold of the chain, but missed. With a satisfied grin, the boatman wound the chain round a hook on the stern of his boat and pushed off. The chain grew taut. To get it back the boys now had to scramble into Dmitry Petrovich's boat.

"Bad, bad," the boatman repeated superciliously. "Longshanks naturally wants to help his brother—I can understand that, but it does not become you Komsomols. I'm afraid, my dear friends, that you shall have to return to the village."

"What right have you got?" Misha cried, trembling with anger.

"It is everybody's duty to help the law," the boatman replied mockingly.

Meanwhile, though the current was slow, it carried both boats towards the bank.

That was what Misha feared the most. If Dmitry Petrovich succeeded in wedging their boat against the bank, he might by some means or other call his men from the woods and the boys would be at their mercy. There was not a moment to be lost.

The boats came to rest against the bank. Misha jumped to the bow.

"Let go, do you hear!"

"I'd be glad to, but I can't," the boatman laughed.

Misha did not let him finish. He jumped into the boat and seized the chain.



"Keep your hands off!" the boatman roared, springing to his feet and raising his oar.

With a single movement, Misha tore the chain off the hook and threw it back into his own boat. Then he straightened up. "Hit me! Just try!"

Dmitry Petrovich stood in his boat with oar raised high, his pale face convulsed with fury. He would have hit Misha, but Genka and Slava were already climbing into his boat. Genka leaned all his weight on the side so that the boat took a list. The boatman nearly lost his balance.

"Back, you scoundrels!" he shouted.

He bent towards Genka, trying to reach him with his oar, but Slava, quiet, timid Slava, tackled him from the other side, grabbing his legs and jerking them towards him. Dmitry Petrovich tumbled into the water.

"Back!" Misha cried.

The boys hurriedly climbed into their boat. Dmitry Petrovich made after them, cursing loudly. Longshanks, who was shaking with fear, stared wildly at him. "Row!" Misha yelled.

Hurriedly, getting their oars entangled again and again, Genka and Slava began to row. The boatman was almost upon them. He stretched out an arm for the stern but missed. Genka and Slava struck the water once, twice.... The boat began to pick up speed. The distance between it and the boatman rapidly widened. For some time, Dmitry Petrovich stood in the shallow water, then turned and waded back to the bank.

The boys went faster and faster, turning round one bend, then another. They passed the tree beneath which they had concealed themselves to watch

the boatman. Then they left the two white stones behind them. The next bend was followed by a long straight stretch extending away from the woods. Now they were safe from pursuit.

Chapter 18

WHAT IS THE MATTER?

Nevertheless, they went on rowing with might and main, breathing heavily and glancing back. It seemed to them that the boatman would again appear from behind the bend, and that he would not be alone but with the two young men he had left in the woods.

The fear that had at first given Genka and Slava strength, began to pass. They suddenly felt completely played out and declared that they could not row another stroke. Misha and Longshanks relieved them.

Once he found himself sitting in the stern, Genka broke the long silence. He gave Slava a look that was at once friendly and derisive, and said:

"What do you think of Slava, eh? The way he tackled the boatman. Never thought he had it in him."

There was no reply.

"But our Longshanks went into a blue funk," Genka continued. "His heart slipped down to his boots."

"What did *you* have to worry about?" Longshanks said, flushing red. "You'll go back to Moscow and forget all about it, but my mother and I have to live here."

"What of it?"

"They may cut our throats, that's what!" Longshanks replied with conviction.

"Rubbish," Genka scoffed.

"It is not. This is not Moscow. They'll knife you in no time. It won't be the first case, either."

"Who are you talking about and who have they killed?" Misha asked.

In reply, Longshanks sniffed and rowed with greater vigour.

"I can't understand why the boatman worried us," said Slava, who was sitting in the stern. "Does he really think this is Kuzmin's boat?"

"What a dunce you are!" Genka cried. "Do you imagine he doesn't know whose boat this is?"

"Kuzmin's has two oars and this is a four-oar boat. There isn't another like it in our village," Longshanks said.

"You see!" Genka put in. "There's something deep in this, I tell you."

"What?"

"He was afraid we would go into the woods and see those two men with the sacks. That's what he was afraid of. No wonder the boat station seemed crooked to me."

"That would be correct under only one condition," Slava said.

"What condition?"

"That there's something secret in those sacks."

Genka lifted his arms in a theatrical gesture.

"You're impossible! We're on the track of a gang of bandits and yet you're doubting! That man wanted to drown us, but to you it seems that nothing has happened. I can't understand you."

"What bandits can there be now?" Slava said.

"Listen to him!" Genka shouted. "'What bandits!' In the flesh, the real thing. And I bet they're the ones who killed Kuzmin."

Longshanks stopped rowing and looked at Genka with fear in his eyes.

"What makes you think they killed Kuzmin?" Slava asked.

"Who else? His brother?" Genka nodded in Longshanks' direction. "Tell us, Longshanks, did your brother kill Kuzmin?"

"No, he did not," Longshanks muttered, pulling at his oars again.

"Then who did?"

"I don't know."

"But I do," Genka said, stubbornly sticking to his point. "Bandits."

Misha kept out of the conversation. All that had just happened was so bewildering, so hard to believe.

The boatman had of course lied about Kuzmin's boat. It had only been a pretext to detain them. The boatman, if anybody, knew every boat in the village. Then why had he lied? Because of those two men? That was unlikely. Those men had vanished into the woods long before the boatman saw Misha and his friends. Yet all this might have a direct bearing on Kuzmin's murder. You could see by the boatman's face that he was the murderer. He had looked frightened when he saw Longshanks in the boat and realized that the lad was trying to get on the trail of the real killer. That was why he had wanted to turn them back.

What if.... Misha felt a cold shiver run down his spine. What if this was connected not only with Kuzmin's murder, but also with the disappearance of Igor and Seva? Something had probably happened to them and that explained the boatman's action. Perhaps Igor and Seva had accidentally witnessed the murder or had run into those men in the woods and the latter, afraid of being exposed, had killed them. Anything could happen in times like these. A struggle was going on in the countryside. Every now and then you'd hear of a rural correspondent or activist being killed. There was no telling what mess the boys had landed in. What was to be done? They were in his charge, whatever way you looked at it.

At that moment, Genka cried out:

"Hut to starboard!"

Chapter 19

AN EXTRAORDINARY MEETING

On the bank, in the shade of a tree, stood a tiny hut made of branches and leaves. A fire was burning near it and by the fire sat a man and a woman.

"Let's ask them if they've seen Igor and Seva," Misha suggested.

The boys rested their oars on the sides of the boat and it slowed down. Misha cupped his hands over his mouth and shouted:

"Hello! I say there, on the bank!"

The man and woman looked round. Both wore thick horn-rimmed glasses.

"Could you tell us," Misha shouted, "if you saw two boys go by here on a raft?"

The man and woman exchanged glances. Then, as though at a signal, they turned their heads to the boys, but made no reply.

"Are they deaf, or what?" Misha said under his breath, then shouted again, "Did you see two boys on a raft?"

Once more the man and woman exchanged glances. Then the man rose to his feet and shouted:

"No understand."

The boys stared at him.

"A foreigner," Genka muttered in confusion.

Before them there was indeed a foreigner—a middle-aged, thickset, bald-headed man in horn-rimmed glasses, a shirt with short sleeves and golf pants reaching down to just below his knees over grey and obviously foreign-made stockings. There was no doubt at all that the man in the golf pants was a foreigner.

"No understand," the foreigner repeated, bursting out laughing and shaking his big, bald, round head.

"Should we go and talk to them?" Misha said indecisively.

"Why not?" Genka backed him up.

The boys rowed to the bank, climbed out of their boat and went up to the hut.

The man, a broad smile creasing his face, was looking at the boys. The woman was sitting by the fire and stirring something in a pot with a spoon. She gave the boys an attentive glance. Misha and his friends sniffed at the air: an aroma of chocolate was rising from the pot.

"You shout from far and we no understand Russian well," the foreigner said.

On the ground near the hut were two rucksacks with belts and shining clasps, two cameras with thin straps attached to them, a tin with a bright label, two thermos flasks and some other small articles of foreign origin.

"They're foreign tourists," Misha decided.

"You repeat question," the foreigner said.

The man was not as bald as the boys had thought when they first saw him from a distance. There was hair on his head, but it was sparse and fair, like fluff. On the whole, this fat, rosy-cheeked man looked like a big, well-fed boy.

"Did you see two boys pass by on a raft?" Misha said, repeating his question.

"Raft? What is raft?"

"Something like a boat," Misha explained, and drew a picture with his hands, "only it is square and made of logs."

The foreigner nodded happily.

"I see, I see!" He turned to the woman and said something to her, then he nodded his head again. "Raft, I understand. I understand. Here two boys were, Young Pioneers, tie." He touched his neck. "Young Pioneers, good Young Pioneers. They here were."

"When?"

"They sleep. Not last night, but before that night. Yesterday morning they swim away on raft. They fix raft and go."

Misha sighed with relief. At last! Igor and Seva were alive and well. Nothing had happened to them.

Further questioning revealed that on the evening before last, Igor and Seva had stopped and spent the night with the foreigners and that before noon yesterday they had mended their raft and had gone downstream. That meant that yesterday, on Wednesday, when Kuzmin was murdered, Igor and Seva were sitting here, talking with the foreigners, and had in no way been affected by the happenings in Khalzin Meadow. That was wonderful! So far as they were concerned then, everything was all right. Now it was only a matter of time before they would be overtaken. They had had a start of two days, and now that had been shortened to only one day. Misha was sure he'd find them by nightfall.

An appetizing aroma of chocolate was filling the air. The boys cast hungry glances at the pot and sniffed at the air unblushingly. Genka was simply trembling with greed.

The woman said something to the man.

With a smile he turned to the boys.

"Drink cocoa?"

Misha shook his head and was about to refuse politely, but Genka stopped him with a whisper:

"Let's have a bite, eh, Misha?"

Now that they had had news of Igor and Seva, there was really no hurry. Besides, they would have to stop for a meal just the same, and if they set about cooking it, they would lose more time. So Misha gave his consent.

The boys sat down round the fire. Longshanks alone remained standing. He felt very shy, for he had never seen foreigners before, and it was only when Misha ordered him to sit down that he squatted down on his haunches. Nevertheless, he kept at a respectful distance from the fire.

The woman poured the steaming cocoa into metal cups, which she produced one from another. From a leather dressing-case she took tiny spoons and a pair of sugar-tongs. She did all this quickly, but she neither spoke nor smiled. Her reddish hair was streaked with grey and she wore it bobbed. Around her eyes there was a network of fine wrinkles. Her arms were thin and sunburnt, but on her wrists there were white lines.

"Probably because she wears bracelets," Misha thought. Thin slices of bread, with a brown paste spread on them, lay on a table-napkin. Slava and Misha each took a sandwich and gave one to Longshanks. Genka, meanwhile, attacked the sandwiches and could not find it in him to tear himself away from them. In a minute, there was nothing left on the napkin.

Slava nudged Genka a few times, but he seemed as though he were possessed. It was not that he was a glutton like Kit; he was simply famished.

As a matter of fact, they were all hungry as wolves. And that tiny sandwich, which resembled cigarette paper, it was that thin, only whetted their appetites. The boys threw to the winds the tact that was necessary in relations with foreigners.

They ate the sandwiches as fast as the woman could make them. The man opened another tin of meat, then sardines and finally a tin of condensed milk. The boys made short work of all that, falling especially on the bread. People say foreigners eat little bread, but the boys were no foreigners.

By the embarrassed way the foreigner glanced into his rucksack and finally turned it inside out, the boys realized that all the eatables had been devoured. But they had already had their fill and were feeling languid and sleepy. In the camp, they had grown used to their after-dinner nap. Misha glanced at his "alarm clock" and said:

"We'll rest for about twenty minutes and then move on. Besides, it would be impolite to just walk away without warning."

Heavy with food, they lay down round the fire, and even Long-shanks made himself more comfortable.

Chapter 20

THE RUMANIAN WOMAN AND THE CUBAN

"Komsomol," the foreigner smiled, pointing to the boys' Y.C.L. badges. "C.Y.I.* International...." (*Communist Youth International*)

"Yes," Misha replied not without a note of challenge in his voice and mispronouncing his words carefully, probably thinking that in that way the foreigner would understand him better, "we Komsomol."

"Good, good, Komsomol, that is good. International, that is good."

"Are you travellers? Voyage?"

"Oh, yes, yes," the foreigner nodded, "we travellers. Walk, ride. Russia good country, beautiful country."

"You like it here?" Genka asked, patting his well-filled tummy.

"Yes, yes, we like very much. Very good."

"How is your Lord* Curzon getting along?" Genka asked pertly.

The foreigner wrinkled his face squeamishly.

"Oh, Lord Curzon.... He bad—Lord Curzon very bad. Poh, Curzon.... Curzon, he is bad."

"So you say Curzon is bad?" Misha asked.

The foreigner nodded.

"Ultimatum, Tory.... Imperialism...."

"Is Mussolini good?"

"Mussolini," the foreigner shook his head energetically, "worse than all. Fascist.... Communist, Socialist, he kill.... Dictator.... Worse than all."

"Why do you have people like Curzon and Mussolini?" Misha asked and,

seeing that the foreigner did not understand him, waved his arm emphatically, "Curzon, Mussolini, get out! Down with them!"

The foreigner nodded happily.

"Oh, yes. Of course. Down with Mussolini, down. Curzon— down."

"Then throw them out," Misha said.

The foreigner thoughtfully nodded and then, slowly choosing his words, said:

"Time. Revolutions we not make, revolutions come."

With a serious and meaningful expression, which was somewhat strained because of the necessity of having to remember Russian words, he continued, "Crisis, unemployment, war. For proletariat— not good. Communist—agitation.... Capitalist him throw in prison." He suddenly laughed and seized himself by the wrists. "Shackles, prison!" Wrinkling his face in a funny way, he added, "Not good— prison."

While the man spoke, Misha glanced at the white lines on the woman's wrists.

The foreigner intercepted his glance, laughed and pointed to the woman's hands.

"Shackles—three years. Prison—ten years." The woman was washing the cups.

The boys did not at once grasp what the foreigner meant. Ten years of prison? Three years of shackles? What did the man mean? Slava was the first to regain his speech.

"Are you a Communist?" he asked the woman. Smiling, the foreigner repeated Slava's question in a language the boys never heard before.

The woman laughed, jabbed a finger at her chest and said: "Communist." Then pointing to the man, added, "Communist," then again pointing to herself, she said, "Rumanian. Cuba, America," she nodded in the direction of her companion.

Stunned, the boys fell silent. These people were probably delegates to the Comintern. There had just been a congress. They wore workingmen's clothes. The man had a kind, clever face, a friendly smile, a strong chin. The woman's face also showed will-power. And she had grey hair and wrinkles.

"That means you're from Cuba?" Misha asked.

"Cuba, Cuba," the man burst out laughing.

"Capablanca," Genka said.

"Oh, yes, yes. Capablanca, champion."

"Is it good in Cuba?"

"Good, very good." The Cuban pointed to the ground. "Walk on ground good." Then he ran his hand around his neck as though tracing a loop, and pointed to a tree. "Hang on tree, bad very bad." He laughed. "I must hang, I run away."

The boys gazed at the Cuban with admiration. This stout, merry man, who looked so ordinary, had been condemned to death, had escaped from the hangman's noose and had managed to reach Russia. What fortitude, what courage he must have! And yet here he was sitting on the bank of the

Utcha, opening tins and laughing as though all that was nothing. These were real people! The boys would have liked to stay longer and talk to them, but they had to go and look for Igor and Seva. They rose to their feet and began making their farewells.

"Good-bye," they said, shaking hands with the Cuban.

"If you follow the bank, you won't miss getting to our camp," Genka added.

The Cuban did not understand what Genka said and only smiled merrily in reply.

The boys showed special regret as they shook hands with the Rumanian woman: there had been shackles on those hands.

Then they went down the bank to their boat.



Nobody told them what to do, but each knew what should be done. They put their entire stock of food into one bag, leaving only the bread for themselves: foreigners hardly ate it.

The Cuban and the Rumanian woman stood watching from the bank, without grasping what the boys were about. Misha hurried his friends: perhaps the Cuban was smiling because he and his friends had so much food and had left after eating all that he and his companion had.

At last, the bag was ready and Misha carried it out of the boat and placed it at the feet of the Cuban and the 'Rumanian woman. At first the foreigners did not understand what the boys were doing, but when they realized what their intention was, they began to wave their arms in protest.

"We not need, not need. Take back, we not need."

But Misha had already pushed off the boat and jumped into it.

The Cuban lifted the bag and holding it out to the boys walked along the bank after the boat. Genka and Slava pulled hard on their oars. The boat rapidly nosed its way to the middle of the river.

The Cuban stopped at the riverside with the bag still in his hands. He was smiling confusedly and shaking his head. The small, red-haired Rumanian woman stood motionless, attentively gazing after the boys with a serious

expression on her face. The slanting shadow cast by a white birch fell across her thin shoulders.

Misha raised his arm and cried:

"Red Front!"

Silently, the woman raised her arm with the fist clenched.

The Cuban laughed, put the bag on the ground and also raised a clenched fist.

"Red Front! Good-bye! Red Front!"

Chapter 21

THE RAFT

The Rumanian woman, the Cuban and their tiny hut disappeared from view and once again the boat moved past woods, fields, meadows, glades, gullies and windmills.

Misha raised himself and yelled:

"There's the raft!"

On a small sand-bank lay a raft, a broken-down structure of short, thin logs held together with bark, torn rope and rusty wire. The fastenings had snapped and the logs had scattered in different directions. In the state it was in, the raft was useless.

"It's Senka's raft," Longshanks said.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. I gave him that wire. And that stake was taken from a fence by Akimka. It's Senka's raft all right."

The boys went ashore. A woods extended to the right of them, and to the left there was a village. A railway embankment loomed beyond the fields, about a kilometre away. A freight train was crawling along the track, leaving behind it a long tail of smoke.

The boys discussed the situation.

Igor and Seva had left the raft here. That was plain enough. But where had they gone to?

"To the station," Genka said.

"Or to the village," Slava suggested.

"What for?"

"For ropes. They probably want to mend the raft and continue on their way."

"On that wreck!"

"Now listen to me," Misha said. "Genka, take Slava with you and go to the station. Longshanks and I will take the boat on to the village. What's it called, Longshanks?"

"Grachyi Viselki."

"Well, that's where we'll go. We'll find out if Igor and Seva have been there. If not for ropes, then at least for food. Go to the village from the station. We'll wait for you there. Only don't be long." Misha looked at his watch. "Oho, it's already half past four! There's another day gone!"

Genka and Slava set out for the station. Misha and Longshanks pushed off and made for the village of Grachyi Viselki. Before long they saw some village children swimming in the river near the bank. They said that two Young Pioneers had been in their village on the previous evening, that they had come in a boat, asked what village it was, and moved on.

"In a boat?" Misha asked, surprised. "Could you describe these Young Pioneers?"

The description fitted Igor and Seva. One was thin, dark, with a hooked nose, the other was fair and plump.

Where did they get the boat from? What nonsense was this?

"What kind of a boat did they have?" Misha asked.

The children explained that it was an ordinary boat, but nobody in their village had one quite like it. They had never seen it before.

"They won't get past Frolkin Ford," Longshanks said, "the river there is clogged up with log bridges and beyond them there is a mill with a dam."

"How far is it to the ford?"

"Three or four kilometres," Longshanks said uncertainly. "We ought to make it before dark."

"But we've got to wait for Genka and Slava," Misha muttered cheerlessly. "By the time they'll get back it'll be night."

The sultriness of noon gave way to the coolness of evening. Swarms of midges appeared over the water. A mist began to settle on the river. Long shadows stretched across the water. Only beyond the distant hills were there the bronze reflections of the sunset.

At long last, Genka and Slava returned from the station, tired, angry and dusty. The station had proved to be quite far away. Added to that, while they were passing through the village they had been attacked by a pack of dogs. And the station itself was not really a station but only a tiny siding and only one train, the ten o'clock, stopped there. They had made inquiries, but nobody had seen Igor and Seva.

Misha quickly explained the situation. The boys took their places in the boat and moved on.

Immediately past the village, their way was barred by cows. The animals were standing in the water along the whole width of the river. The boys rowed carefully. Slava, who was in the bow, fiercely waved his arms, but the cows only gazed at him watchfully, showing not the slightest inclination to move out of the way.

"Whoa, get going, what are you standing there for!" Slava yelled.

"Who are you saying 'whoa' to? They're not horses," Genka said. "The word to use is 'allez.'"

"Allez!" Slava shouted trustfully.

But that too made no impression on the cows.

Genka rolled with laughter.

It was only after the boys raised a terrible din and began to wave their oars that the cows finally moved aside and let them through.

For some time they rowed without further adventures.

The last lights of the sunset grew dim. A hush at once descended upon the river. The boys were silent. Everything around looked so deserted and dreary.

"Where's that Frolkin Ford of yours?" Misha asked.

"We'll be there soon," Longshanks replied.

Swiftly, it grew dark. The banks began to lose their outlines.

There was no help for it but to stop for the night, otherwise they might miss Igor and Seva in the darkness.

Chapter 22

THE JOURNEY CONTINUES

They found a big hay-rick, brought all their things, dragged the boat out of the water and chained it to a tree. All they had for supper was bread soaked in water from the river.

The rays of the dying sun were illuminating the tops of the trees, but the trails in the woods were in deep shadow. The birds' chorus fell silent. The bumble-bees and flies disappeared as if by magic.

Fire-flies were already twinkling in the shrubs and grass. New sounds came to life in the woods: an eagle-owl laughed shrilly, an owl screamed repulsively, now crying pitifully like a child, now whistling or simply hooting. And that cry instantly reminded the boys of the boatman.

They were terrified. Something rustled in the hay. Genka suggested it was a snake. But Longshanks assured them that there were no snakes in these parts.

The owl screamed again.

"Damn nuisance!" Genka said. "Isn't it fed up with itself?"

"Wood-goblins sometimes scream like that," Longshanks said.

Genka fidgeted in the hay and laughed.

"That's right, you haven't said a word about wood-goblins today."

"There are goblins in woods," Longshanks insisted, "and in swamps. In water there are water-goblins and mermaids. And in houses, there are house-goblins."

"Have you seen any of them for yourself?" Genka said, yawning loudly.

"Don't be silly," Longshanks laughed quietly. "Only a magician or a witch can see them. They're never seen by ordinary folk. But if you go into a woods, a goblin will take hold of you and make you go round and round in circles. You'll find yourself coming back to the same spot every time. Do you know why that happens? Well, I'll tell you. Because goblins make you walk in circles."

"That's not the reason," Misha said.

"Then what is?"

"The reason is that people make longer steps with their left leg than with their right. That is why they walk in circles. Get it?"

"Wait a minute." Genka raised himself on his elbows. "You mean to say that if I'm on the left side of the road I'll gradually find myself on the right side?"

"No," Misha said, "when you walk on a road, the road itself gives you your bearings and you keep correcting the length of your stride without noticing it. But you can't get your bearings in a wood and therefore you do not correct your step. Am I right, Slava?"

In reply he heard a light snore. Slava was sound asleep.

"Let's follow his example," Misha said. "We have to get up early."

With the first rays of the sun Misha opened his eyes and began to wake his friends.

Longshanks was on his feet in an instant. Slava did not want to get up, but he made himself rise and, yawning, dragged himself to the river for a dip. Genka, meanwhile, had dug himself so deep into the hay and was curled up so fast that it was almost impossible to get at him. He was asleep even when his friends half-carried him to the river. He woke up and fought free only when they started swinging him preparatory to throwing him into the water.

"You had no call waking me. I would have gotten up in time for breakfast."

But they had nothing for breakfast and so, tightening their belts, the boys took their places in the boat and continued their journey.

After they had covered about two kilometres, Genka suddenly sniffed once or twice and said:

"I smell porridge!"

His friends sniffed at the air. Indeed, there was a smell of slightly burnt millet porridge. It was so strong, savoury and appetizing that it brought tears to the boys' eyes.

"It's from the right bank," Misha said in a businesslike tone. "Longshanks, head for the bank, and you, fellows, pull hard!"

Urged on by the mounting smell of porridge, the boys pulled with all their strength. Misha stood in the bow, turning his nose now in one direction, now in another.

Soon on a hillock they saw the white tents of a Red Army camp. Horses were stamping their hoofs at a picket rope, a long row of wash-basins, hanging from a cross-piece between two trees, glittered in the sun, red streamers with slogans printed on them fluttered in the wind, target boards stood in the shooting range, and there were ditches and embankments. But the camp was deserted. The men were probably training. On the bank, steam was rising from a field-kitchen. That was where the smell of porridge was coming from. A Red Army man, his face red with heat, was wielding a huge ladle. Another soldier was on his knees splitting firewood and feeding it into the fire.

The boys edged up to the kitchen. The cook gave them a sidelong glance and turned his head without saying a word.

Misha and his friends made no move to go away although they realized that it was silly to stand like this. They were terribly hungry but they did not know how to go about getting something to eat. Finally, Misha said:

"Please, comrades, could you tell us if two Young Pioneers, two boys in a boat, passed by yesterday evening? We're looking for them."

The cook paid no attention. But his assistant said:

"We didn't see them. They might have gone by, but we didn't see them."

There was another silence.

Genka gave the cook an ingratiating look.

"You don't need any help?" he said.

The cook squinted angry eyes at him, turned away and barked:

"Ignatyuk, plates!"

The soldier got to his feet, went to an awning and came back with four big aluminium plates. With his huge ladle the cook filled the plates with porridge, then with a smaller one poured butter over it. Genka ran to the boat for spoons. Scalding themselves, the boys fell upon the porridge. For some time the only sounds were a loud smacking of lips and the squelching of the porridge.

When the plates were empty, the cook again turned his red, angry face to the boys and, after looking each of them in the eyes, hit the pot with his ladle.

"Ignatyuk, more!"

Ignatyuk collected the plates. The cook ladled out more porridge into them, smaller portions than the first but exactly what was needed. He certainly knew his job, the cook did, in spite of his being so taciturn.

"Ignatyuk," he said, "dry rations—bread!"

Ignatyuk went to the awning again and came back with four big pieces of bread, which he gave to the boys.

"A-about tur-rn, quick mar-rch!" the cook commanded without turning round.

"Thank you!" the boys cried happily and ran to their boat.

In the boat, Misha took the bread from his friends, put it in a bag and, raising a finger, pronounced meaningfully:

"The world's not without kind people!"

Satiated and happy, the boys rowed briskly. They were not far from Frolkin Ford. According to Longshanks, that was as far as Igor and Seva could go.

"Well, here we are. This is Frolkin Ford," Longshanks said.

Two logs, supported by piles driven into the bank, spanned the narrow river. This was Frolkin Ford. A booming sound could be heard in the distance.

"That's the water at the windmill," Longshanks explained. "The dam is near from here."

A boat with its bottom side up was lying on the bank. With an effort, the boys righted it.

"Do you know this boat?" Misha asked Longshanks, sudden anxiety filling his voice.

Stuttering with excitement, Longshanks said:

"It belongs to Kuzmin, the man who was murdered."

"Can't be!" Genka cried.

But Longshanks could not be mistaken. It was Kuzmin's boat.

This was staggering news. The boys exchanged frightened looks. Again Kuzmin. Again that mysterious murder. And it looked as though Igor and Seva were somehow mixed up in it after all. How did they get Kuzmin's boat? Where had they taken it from? When Kuzmin and Nikolai went to Khalzin Meadow, Igor and Seva were with the foreigners, that is, they were far below Khalzin Meadow. And they had left their raft on a sand-bank, which was also past Khalzin Meadow.

"They found this boat accidentally," Misha said at last with a note of uncertainty in his voice. "They had no idea it belonged to Kuzmin. Longshanks, are you sure this is Kuzmin's boat?"

"Positive!"

"Let's suppose it is," Misha continued, "but those silly asses did not know that and they could not know it. They simply found it drifting in the river and dragged it on to the bank so that the owner would see it and take it."

"It's a disgrace!" Genka exclaimed. "They ran away from the camp, stole a boat...."

"Wait," Misha stopped him. "At any rate, one thing is clear: Nikolai did not take or hide Kuzmin's boat. That's very important. We'll find the chaps and get to the bottom of this. See, the boat's still wet. That means it was taken out of the water a short while ago. Perhaps even this morning. Is there a village nearby?"

"Stukolovo," Longshanks replied. "About three kilometres from here."

The boys went to the village, leaving Longshanks behind to guard the two boats.

Chapter 23

THE FUGITIVES

At first, the road followed the river-bank, then the fringe of a woods, and then swung sharply into a field.

On the fringe of the woods, a boy cowherd, with a whip slung across his shoulders, was walking behind a herd of cows. Two small dogs began to bark furiously when Misha and his friends came into sight, but when they ran up to the boys they began to wag their little tails fawningly.

"Will we get to the village by this road?" Misha asked the cowherd.

"Yes," the cowherd replied and then for a long time followed the boys with his eyes.

It seemed that the village was still asleep. There was not a soul in the streets, locks hung on all the gates and the dogs did not bark. The boys went past the village shop and saw a big house with a sign reading: Stukolovo Village Soviet.

The doors of the Village Soviet were ajar. But there was nobody inside. A shiny, timeworn table, with the drawers open, stood by its lonesome self. On one of the walls hung a telephone. The open window banged to and fro. The floor-boards squeaked underfoot, and there was paint only along the walls; in the middle it had worn away. Coming out of the Village Soviet, the boys saw an old watchman in a sheepskin coat holding a rattle in his hand. He looked suspiciously at Misha and his friends. "What do you want?"

The boys explained that they were from a Young Pioneer camp and were looking for two of their number, who had come here the day before in a boat.



The watchman listened in silence. He seemed to be either chewing something or simply moving his lips.

"Come along with me," he said sternly.

"Where to?"

"They'll decide. Come."

Completely bewildered, the boys followed him. The watchman, hobbling in a funny way in his huge, patched felt boots, kept throwing queer and comically suspicious glances at the three lads.

In this manner they reached a big, two-roomed hut.

"Go in," the watchman said sternly and followed the boys in.

In the dark passage, Misha felt for the door-knob and pulled it. The door opened. The boys entered the hut, stopping in amazement on the threshold.

At a big square uncovered table sat Igor, Seva and a militiaman — an ordinary militiaman in uniform. His cap and belt with the pistol in the holster were on the bench beside him.

The mistress of the house was bustling at the stove. The back half of the room was partitioned off by a chintz curtain, from behind which came the squeals of children.

Igor, Seva and the militiaman were eating potatoes and pickled cucumbers as if they had not a care in the world. But Misha quickly realized that the boys were under arrest. And that explained the surprise of the cowherd and the fussy sternness of the watchman.

"Here, comrade," the watchman said to the militiaman, "I've brought you three more. They were looking for this pair."

A fair head, then another, showed from behind the curtain. In something like a minute, six children, all with fair, uncut hair, in long shirts, lined up in front of the curtain and stared at Misha, Genka and Slava.

At the sight of their friends, Igor and Seva stopped chewing and half-rose from their bench. But a warning gesture from the militiaman made them sit down again.

"Who are you?" the militiaman asked with an air of importance.

Misha told him who they were and why they had come.

"I see," the militiaman said, throwing a potato from one hand to the other and blowing on it. "Have you got any papers to show your identity?"

The boys had their Y.C.L. cards with them, while Genka, in addition, had cards showing that he was a member of the International Aid Organization for Revolutionary Fighters and of the Voluntary Society for the Promotion of the Air Force. All these they placed on the table in front of the militiaman. The latter squinted at the cards and then returned his attention to the potato. He ate it slowly and everybody silently watched him. Even the old watchman, who should have gone back to his post, gazed open-mouthed. Igor, a swarthy, nervous boy with a shock of wiry hair and a sharp nose, anxiously moved his eyes from the militiaman to his friends and back again. Seva, a fat, phlegmatic-looking boy, sat with his head bowed, then, without looking up, stretched out for a cucumber and began munching it so loudly that the sound filled the whole hut.

At last, the militiaman wiped his lips and hands and bent over the cards. He was so long examining them that Misha began to doubt his literacy. But the militiaman called out his name, then Genka's and Slava's and even noticed that Genka was behind with his membership dues at the International Aid Organization for Revolutionary Fighters and the Voluntary Society for the Promotion of the Air Force.

However, the cards did make some impression and the militiaman took a sheet of paper and a pencil from his satchel and began writing a protocol.

To the question whether he knew the boys he was "confronted with," Misha replied that he knew them and gave their surnames and their Moscow addresses. The militiaman checked that with the depositions given by Igor and Seva and found that it tallied. To the question when and why Igor and Seva left the camp, Misha replied that they left three days ago over some stupid joke as a note written by them showed. With a detached air, the militiaman pinned the note to the protocol.

When the militiaman finished writing the protocol, Misha signed it. Everything in it was correct, but there were quite a few spelling mistakes.

"Why have you detained them?" Misha asked.

"On suspicion," the militiaman replied, tightening his belt and adjusting the holster.

"On suspicion of what?"

"Complicity."

"In what?"

"In the murder of Citizen Kuzmin."

"What!" Misha cried. "There must be some mistake."

"We have evidence," the militiaman said, putting on his cap. He turned to the watchman. "Akim, I'll go and put a call through to the uyezd centre. You keep an eye here," he nodded significantly towards the boys.

The watchman closed the door behind the militiaman, moved up a stool and sat down with an air that showed he was firmly resolved not to let anyone out of the hut.

The boys now had an opportunity to talk.

"Satisfied?" Genka asked.

Igor and Seva hung their heads.

"Now tell us what happened," Misha said.

"We didn't do anything," Igor replied in a trembling voice.

Seva began to snifle, but added nothing to what Igor said.

"Why were you detained?"

"Word of honour," Igor whimpered, "we did not do anything. Our raft broke. There was an empty boat on the river and we took it and came here. But nobody believes us."

"Did you find the boat at Peschanaya Kosa?" Misha asked. "Yes. But how did you know?"

"That's my business," Misha replied in a tone which implied, to Igor and Seva at least, that this was not the only thing he knew.

"It'll teach you how to run away from the camp!" Genka added.

"When did you meet the foreigners and when did you leave them?"

Amazed that he was so well-informed, Igor and Seva told Misha that they came across the foreigners on the very first day, that is, on Tuesday, and left them on the following day, that is, on Wednesday. They had found the boat shortly after that and had taken it. They were detained here.

"Did the soldiers feed you?"

"Yes."

"Aha! Then why did you say you came straight here? You've got to be exact, but you're confusing things. That's why they don't believe you."

Igor and Seva bowed their heads again.

"We'll help you out, of course," Misha continued, "even though you don't deserve it."

"This should be a lesson to you," Genka interposed.

Igor and Seva hung their heads still lower.

"Of course, you don't deserve to be helped," Misha continued, "and what we really ought to do is to let you try and get out of this by yourselves. But we'll help you only to save the honour and reputation of our troop. You, of course, don't give a hang for either."

Igor shook his head in protest. Seva considered that for a moment and reached out for another cucumber.

"There you are," Misha went on, "you don't give a hang. If you did you wouldn't have run away. All of Moscow is saying that we have no discipline or order in our troop. Of course, you don't care. What's the troop to you? But we care about the troop's reputation and that is the only reason why we'll help you. We'll get you clear of this, take you back to the camp and let the troop decide what to do with you. We'll see what you'll have to say...."

Misha would have gone on in this vein indefinitely had not the militiaman returned and announced that he had been ordered to take Igor and Seva to town, to the investigator.

"We'll also go along," Misha declared. "We'll not let you take them alone."

"Nobody is restricted in his movements," the militiaman replied.

Misha told Slava to go back to the camp with Longshanks and not breathe a word about Igor's and Seva's misadventures. If their parents came, he was to tell them that they had turned up and would soon be back in the camp.

Slava went back to the boat. The militiaman took Igor and Seva to the station. Misha and Genka followed them.

Chapter 24

AT THE INVESTIGATOR'S

The investigator was not what Misha expected he would be like. Misha's idea of an investigator was a tall, sombre man with a concentrated, watchful and penetrating look, smart, taciturn and distrustful.

But before him sat a short man with the most ordinary kind of face, grey eyes, with an absent-minded and, as it seemed to Misha, inattentive look. The table, piled with folders, was covered with a torn piece of green cardboard stained with ink and filled with illegible handwriting and meaningless drawings.

The investigator walked out of the room a few times, leaving papers on the table. That surprised Misha, for so far as he was concerned these papers were confidential. On the whole, everything was done so openly here, men spoke loudly and people walked in and out. That greatly shook Misha's respect for this institution, where, in his mind, a secret, dangerous and selfless struggle was being waged against crime.

Misha's impression was that the investigator paid no attention at all to what Igor and Seva said. He was busy writing something that had nothing to do with the case. He gave what he wrote to a colleague with the words: "Put this in the Kochetkov file," and at once got down to writing on another sheet. When Misha began to tell him about the boatman attacking him and his friends and about the men in the woods, the investigator was so inattentive that Misha fell into a hurt silence.

Continuing to write, the investigator finally asked:

"Do you think you can show me the place where you found the boat?"

"Of course," Igor replied. "We found it at Peschanaya Kosa."

"How far is that from Khalzin Meadow?"

Misha replied to that question:

"About seven or eight kilometres."

The investigator raised his head and, tapping on the table with his pencil, said:

"Eight kilometres. How did the boat get there? It could not have drifted that far. The river's narrow and crooked. The boat would have got stuck somewhere to the bank. That means somebody took it. Who? Ribalin? But what sense was there for him to take the boat so far away and then come back on foot? Let's suppose the murderer is not Ribalin, but somebody else.

And that somebody else took the boat. Why? By doing that he leaves a trail which proves he was in the meadow. What he would normally do was to cover up his tracks and let Ribalin take the rap. The third possibility is that the boat was taken by a stranger. But Kuzmin was murdered yesterday morning and you found the boat on the same morning. Consequently, it was taken right after the murder. That stranger could not help seeing what took place on the bank or, at least, Kuzmin's body."

He thought for a moment, then continued:

"Ribalin flatly denies having anything to do with the murder. The evidence against him is heavy, but the circumstances still need clearing up. One of them, and the most puzzling of all, is the taking of the 'boat. Had the boat been at Peschanaya Kosa it would have made our task easier. But you took it and made a muddle of things. Now everything is much more complicated."

Igor and Seva, feeling very guilty, sat without raising their eyes.

"Are you sure that all you have told me is the truth?" the investigator asked and for the first time gave the boys a look which, in Misha's opinion, was exactly in line with an investigator's job. It was penetrating and stern.

"Word of honour!" Igor and Seva cried in unison.

Misha declared that he could vouch for the boys.

"I believe you," the investigator said, "but I may want to see you again. You'll have to stay in town for a day or two. Have you got any friends you could stay with?"

The boys said that they had no friends in town.

"That makes it a little difficult," the investigator said. "Now here's what we'll do. I'll give you a note to the Gubernia Department of 'Public Education. They'll put you up for two days in an orphanage and then we'll send you back to your camp."

He wrote a note and gave it to Misha.

"Who are we to ask for?"

"Let me see.... The person to see is Comrade Serov. He's in charge of the children's establishments."

Serov, Serov.... Who was he? The name sounded familiar.

Of course, he was the man who had signed the safeguard for the manor.

"You'll not detain them long?" Misha asked in parting.

"Two days at the most," the investigator replied.

Chapter 25

SEROV

Serov wore the usual dress of a gubernia official: riding breeches, top boots and a khaki service jacket with laid-on pockets. He headed the economic department and had a private office where he sat at a big desk with round, carved legs.

At first sight, Serov reminded Misha of a geometry lesson when he drew

cubes and circles. Only at the lesson the cubes and circles had been in rows, while here there was one circle sitting on one cube: on the short, square body was a big, round, completely bald head. There was no neck, just a few folds of fat between the head and the body.

Fat lips, small, quick hazel eyes, and a self-satisfied smile gave Serov the look of a man who had just risen from a well-set table and would not mind returning to it. His square body, thickened by the laid-on pockets on his fat chest, was motionless in the armchair, while the head kept turning in all directions like a doll's, which can be turned or even twisted round several times.

"This note mentions two boys, but there are four of you," Serov said, his quick eyes lighting on each of the boys in turn.

"It's about them," Misha said, pointing to Igor and Seva.

"What does the investigator need them for?"

Misha told him about Kuzmin's murder.

"What Karagayevo?" Serov asked.



"There's a big manor there."

"I know," Serov nodded and meaningfully raised a short fat finger. "A historical monument."

Then in detail he asked about the murder, the camp, the village, and how Igor and Seva went down the river and took the boat. As he listened to Misha, he nodded his head approvingly. The boys could not tell what exactly he approved of. When Misha came to the part about the boatman, Serov threw up his arms and on his face there appeared an expression which seemed to say: "Just look at the things that happen in this big wide world of ours."

Then he suddenly laughed in the shrill way that girls sometimes do and began to tell the boys about the manor and its value as a historical monument. It was the pride of the gubernia, Serov said, and its furnishings were in the local Museum of Regional Studies, in the Life of the 18th-Century Gentry section. As self-respecting Komsomols, it was the boys' duty to look after the manor and refrain from touching or spoiling anything.

The manor, Serov said, was the property of the people and it was the duty of real revolutionaries to preserve and guard what belonged to the people.

He spoke rapidly and his quick hazel eyes darted from one boy to another. But the boys badly wanted to sleep. To keep awake, Gen-ka fidgeted in his chair, Igor blinked his eyes, while Seva shook his head which kept falling on his chest. Misha wanted Serov to stop, but he found it impossible to put in a single word.

In conclusion, Serov said:

"Now about the boys. I can't put them up at the orphanages. They are full and we do not have extra rations."

Misha looked at Serov with surprise. Why had he kept them for a whole hour if that had been the case. Evening was close at hand and quarters were still to be found for Igor and Seva.

"That's a how d'you do!" Genka said. "Do you expect them to sleep in the street?"

Serov thought for a moment.

"Have you any friends here?" he asked.

"No."

"Not a single one?"

"No."

"This is what I can do," Serov said suddenly. "I can let the boys stay with me for two days. You're right, we can't very well let them sleep in the street." He shook his bald head sadly. "Fine people they have at the Criminal Investigation Department, summoning youngsters and then leaving them to their own devices. That's how you get waifs. We're righting that, while they're fostering it."

He rose from his armchair. It turned out that though broad-shouldered and stout, he was quite short, in fact, no taller than the boys.

"So that's that," he said. "The boys will stay at my house for two days. I'll see that they're properly fed."

Chapter 26

BORIS SERGEYEVICH

Outside the offices of the Gubernia Department of Public Education, the boys ran into Boris Sergeyevich, the headmaster of a Moscow children's home, who a few days ago had inspected the manor with Korovin and had spoken with the "countess."

Hearing that Misha and his friends had been to see Serov, he asked:

"Ordered you to leave the manor grounds?"

"No, why?" Misha was surprised. "We went to see him about something quite different. I would have told you what about, but," he pointed to Igor and Seva, "I've got to take them to Serov's place."

"I'll go along with you," Boris Sergeyevich said.

On the way, Misha told him what had happened in the past few days.

Genka added colourful comments.

"There are two orphanages in this town," Boris Sergeyevich said, shrugging his shoulders. "Both are half empty. I wonder why Serov didn't send the boys to one of them? I can't understand it."

"He probably thought that Igor and Seva would be more comfortable at his place," Genka said. "A family home, you know."

"Serov might have thought that," Boris Sergeyevich replied, "but what he actually said was that the orphanages are full, which is not true."

"We couldn't very well refuse," Misha said. "Igor and Seva have to sleep somewhere."

"Yes, of course," Boris Sergeyevich agreed.

"That's my idea, too," Genka put in. "At Serov's they'll be fed and given beds. Those dumbclucks have all the luck! They ran away from the camp, made everybody anxious, got into a ridiculous muddle and came off scatheless. What they need is not a down mattress at Serov's but a day or two at the militia."

"How do you know Serov's got down mattresses?" Igor protested.

"I know. You can see by his face."

"What penetration!" Boris Sergeyevich laughed.

Serov lived on the outskirts and to get there they had to walk from almost one end of the town to the other.

"What a town!" Genka prattled. "Hasn't even got a tram. And look at the names of the streets: Streletskaya, Storozhevaya, Pushkarskaya, Soldatskaya (*Streletsi, tsar's bodyguard instituted by Ivan the Terrible. Guards', Cannoneers', Soldiers' . . . respectively*). This town must be very old. Must have been a fortress or something."

"It is an old town," Boris Sergeyevich confirmed, "and was founded long before Moscow."

"Did you come here about the labour commune?" Misha asked.

"Yes," Boris Sergeyevich frowned.

He said nothing further, but asked the boys to tell him all they knew about Kuzmin's murder. In reply to Misha's assurances that Ribalin was innocent, Boris Sergeyevich said:

"It's difficult for me to judge. I do not know the details. But the guilty party is the one who wanted Kuzmin to die."

They reached Serov's house.

It was a small, single-storey cottage with a small porch and three windows with white curtains. Over the fence, painted a bright red like the cottage and bristling along the top with long, sharp nails, could be seen the crowns of apple- and pear-trees. Near the door, a bell-pull dangled on a piece of wire.

"I'll wait while you finish your business there," Boris Sergeyevich said and slowly walked away down the road.

The boys climbed the steps to the porch. Misha tugged the bell-pull. The boys heard a metallic clatter, then footfalls.

"Who's there?" a woman's voice asked.

"We're from Comrade Serov," Misha replied.

A bolt rattled. The door opened. On the threshold stood a tall, handsome woman in a bright dressing-gown with green and yellow flowers printed on it.

"We were sent by Comrade Serov..." Misha began.

"I know," the woman said quickly, her thin lips curving haughtily. "Which are the boys?"

Misha indicated Igor and Seva.

"These."

The woman took a step back and opened the door wider.

"Come in.»

Igor and Seva irresolutely entered the house. The woman banged the door shut after them.

A little put out by such a reception, Misha and Genka remained standing on the porch.

"I was hoping we'd get supper," Genka muttered, despondently.

"Supper! Fine hope!" Misha replied. "You'll have to wait a long time for that." He looked indignantly at the door: they had not even been given an opportunity to say good-bye to their friends.

But who did the woman remind him of? Her face looked very familiar. Perhaps she looked like one of their neighbours in Moscow? ...

"I swear," Genka said, "if we don't get something to eat soon, I'll die of hunger."

Chapter 27

LIFE OF THE GENTRY

Genka did not die of hunger. An hour later saw the boys and Boris Sergeyevich walking out of a Food Commissariat canteen, where they had a satisfying meal of cabbage soup and rice pudding.

During the meal, Boris Sergeyevich told Misha and Genka that the labour commune idea was not progressing. Serov was against it and he had the backing of one of the local officials. His grounds were that the manor was a historical monument. They, Boris Sergeyevich said, had therefore to upset that version. The task was not impossible. He had already found out a thing or two in Moscow. His intention now was to go to the local Museum of Regional Studies where he hoped to find facts to support his case.

"Serov also spoke about the museum," Misha said. "May we go with you?"

"If you like."

"What an idea!" Genka said with a wry face. "What makes you want to go to that dump? What's so interesting about it? I bet they have mammoth tusks there. Every museum you go to, you find mammoth tusks. All want to prove that mammoths lived in their gubernia. I don't see that that's important even if they did."

"What if suddenly, besides mammoth tusks, there's something else and

that something is really interesting?"

"No," Genka maintained, "you'll find nothing except mammoth tusks and, perhaps, a shrine with the relics of some saint, which is really nothing but trash and opium for the people."

"You don't have to go if you don't want to," Misha said. "You can wait for me at the railway station."

"Oh, no, rather than hang around the station I'll go to that museum," Genka announced.

Genka was right. The first things they saw when they entered the museum were the tusks of a mammoth. Curved, yellowish, they hung as an ornament in the museum's small vestibule, testifying to the fact that so far as mammoths went this gubernia did not lag behind the others.

A long suite of rooms extended from the vestibule along the circumference of the museum. Each room was a "section." Fauna, minerals, the vegetable kingdom, handicrafts, farming, history of the region. The history of the region, be it said, occupied a few rooms. On the door of one of them hung a plaque with the inscription: *Life of 18th-Century Gentry*. The furniture from the manor was in this room.

The display was of a drawing-room. Behind a rope was mahogany furniture: a table, a divan, armchairs and chairs upholstered with dark-red satin, a fire-place screen with Chinese birds drawn on it, a big harp with torn strings, two tall mirrors with candelabra on either side.

There also were three wardrobes. In one, bearing the inscription: *Clothes of the Gentry*, stood mannequins in ancient dress clothes with medals, Orders, stars and blue bands across the shoulders. In the second *{Leisure of the Gentry}*, were pipes, chibouks, playing cards and ivory billiard balls and chessmen. In the third *{Recreation of the Gentry}*, there was, for some reason, a dinner set with huge pistols and other ancient weapons ranged around it.

Genka commented very deprecatingly on the life of the gentry.

"What did they want such long pipes for? How is one to smoke them? Try and carry one like that about with you! Or that caftan! Don't tell me that it's comfortable to wear. And the gowns.... Rags! Who wants all this? Leisure of the gentry, recreation of the gentry —as though anyone cares? We haven't got any counts or landlords, so why make a show of all this?"

But Misha was not listening to Genka. His attention had been immediately caught by a bronze bird. It was a small replica of the one on the manor. It stood on a marble rest and gazed at the boys with round, irate eyes.

"Look, Boris Sergeyevich," Misha said, "exactly the same eagle as on the manor."

Boris Sergeyevich was examining some charts hanging on the wall. He turned round.

"This bird is on the family coat-of-arms," he said, "but I can't tell why it's been sculptured in bronze. Possibly just a whim." And he went back to the charts.

Misha suddenly felt sleepy. It was always like that! The moment you step

into a museum you begin to feel drowsy. Even in the Tretyakov Picture Gallery. Why did museums make you sleepy? You always felt like running through the halls as quickly as possible and going out into the street again.

But Boris Sergeyevich's presence made Misha fight his sleepiness. He forced himself to continue looking at the pictures and charts showing the wealth of counts and portraying their life. One of the pictures showed a serf being flogged. He was lying on a bench with his hands and feet tied. On either side of him was a man in a red shirt, with a switch in theatrically uplifted hands, while some distance away stood the landlord himself in a gown. In his teeth he had a pipe reaching down to the ground.

A big map of the uyezd showed that the Karagayev counts had owned as much land as did two thousand peasant households. The peasants' land was painted red, and the count's—black. It stretched in a huge mass along both sides of the Utcha up to the Khalzan River, where Kuzmin was killed.

Boris Sergeyevich spent a particularly long time in front of this map and even made a copy of it. He explained to Misha that after the Revolution almost all of the Karagayev land had been given to the peasants. What was left had been taken by the village kulaks. If the labour commune was organized, the kulaks would have to return that land.

"What a hope!" Genka smirked. "Try and get something out of Yerofeyev."

There was another map. It showed what wealth the Karagayev family had had in Russia. In addition to Karagayevo, they had three other estates and, besides, mines in the Urals.

"It's outrageous!" Misha was indignant. "One man had everything, while others had nothing. That was not fair. Is it true that he had diamond mines in the Urals?"

"Yes," Boris Sergeyevich said. "The old count stubbornly looked for diamonds in the Urals. But from what I can gather he did not find anything valuable. Of course, you know that only big diamonds are valued, and he did not find any big ones. But the entire history of this family is connected with some mystery about precious stones. Somebody had murdered somebody and somebody else had gone mad. On the very eve of the Revolution, the old count was deprived of all civil rights and the property went to his son. On the whole, it was a filthy business."

"To the devil with them," Genka said. "Let's go. It's nauseating even to stand here!"

As they went through the door, Misha looked back. And as at the manor, he thought the bronze bird had a sinister look as it followed them out with its fixed gaze....





Part III

GOLIGIN BRUSHWOOD ROAD

Chapter 28

SENKA YEROFEYEV

In the camp, life returned to its normal course—reveille, morning line-up, raising of the flag, work in the village, games, discussions round the fire. But the feeling that there was some mystery in the air never left Misha.

Nikolai Ribalin's guilt had not been proved, but he was still in custody. On the other hand, the boatman was walking about as though nothing were the matter. Whenever he met Misha, he grinned as though that incident on the river had never happened. Once he even winked.

The "countess" was associated with him. She was sending something to the woods. And the kulak Yerofeyev was in concert with them. Hm.... He had to get to the bottom of this, for an innocent man might suffer.

But how was he to go about it? Ought he to go to the woods and find out who those men were? But where was he to look for them? Besides, it was dangerous. He would have gone if he had been alone. But what about his friends? Anything could happen and the blame would fall on him.

That meant that there was only one thing to do—to find out what the boatman took to the woods. That could be found out through Senka Yerofeyev. He had helped to carry the sacks to the boat. Naturally, he would not come out with it on his own, but it was worth while trying. He might let out a hint.

Genka supported this plan.

"But it would not be the thing for you to do it," he said. "You are the

leader of the troop, and the chaps are shy of you. But I'll get Senka to talk, you may be sure of that."

"You'll blunder somewhere," Misha said doubtfully, "and that'll spoil everything."

But Genka assured him that he would be careful and wary. After all, was this his first important assignment?

Genka had no plan of action. As always, he banked on luck. The important thing was to start a conversation. When that happened he'd see how things shaped out.

The Young Pioneers were fitting out the club with the help of the village children. Senka and Akimka were the only ones who kept aloof. They sat on a pile of logs, chewing sunflower seeds and, lazily swearing, playing a game of cards. Genka stopped near them and watched the game, pretending he was interested. "Join us," Senka invited, shuffling the cards. "I don't play cards, but I don't mind watching," Genka replied, sitting down on a log.

"Don't be afraid," Senka said with a leer. "We're not playing for money. Only for fillips."

"It's best not to play with me," Genka said importantly, "I'm rather good."

"Is that so?"

"It's the truth. Give me the pack."

Genka took the pack, shuffled it and showed a trick. The trick was simple, but Senka and Akimka were impressed. At least, that is what Genka thought. There was no mistaking the village lads' wonder. : Pleased with his success, Genka, with feigned indifference, said: "That's nothing. Just by looking at a person I can tell what he did today, yesterday or the day before yesterday."

"Whose leg are you trying to pull?" Senka said.

"I can prove it."

"All right, tell me what I did yesterday?"

"You're fast! Catch me telling you."

"Of course you won't, because you can't."

"I can't?"

"You can't!"

"I can't?"

"No."

"What if I can?" "Then tell me."

"Now listen," Genka said impressively, "if I tell you what you did yesterday, you'll tell me what you did the day before yesterday." "It's a bargain."

"Yesterday," Genka said, "you were at the windmill."

"True," Senka muttered. "You could very well have seen me."

"From where? I never go to the windmill. All I did was to look at you and guess. Now tell me what you did the day before yesterday." Senka gave Genka a sullen look. "Think you're the only one who can guess?"

"What has that got to do with it? We made a bargain and I guessed right. Now you tell me what you did the day before yesterday and I'll judge if

you're telling the truth or not."

"Cunning, that's what you are! Think you're tops at guessing? Others can do it just as well."

"I can guess anything you want," Akimka said hoarsely, tracing a figure in the sand with his toe.

"What for instance?" Genka asked derisively. "Anything you like."

"He can, too," Senka put in. "Akimka can guess anything." "What?" Genka pressed.

"Anything," Senka replied and turned to Akimka. "Akimka, we'll hide something and you'll look for it. Think you can find it?" "Why not?"

"All right. Go somewhere you can't see us." Akimka shuffled off towards a shed. "Don't look back," Senka called after him. Akimka buried his face against the side of the shed. "Here," Senka whispered and produced an egg from inside his shirt, "this is an ordinary egg. See? Let him find it. He'll look for it till doomsday."

Genka regarded Senka suspiciously. What if there was an agreement between him and Akimka? They were friends, after all. They might be pulling his leg. All right, let them try!

"Let's hide it under that log," he suggested.

"No." Senka shook his head. "He'd find it at once. This is what we'll do. We'll hide it under one of our caps. Let him look for it then. He'll never find it."

Before Genka could reply, his cap was in Senka's hands. He carefully put the egg in it, put it back on Genka's head and pulled the peak well down on his forehead.

"What a lark!" Senka whispered. "He'll never find it in a million years. We'll give him five hot ones."

"All right," thought Genka to himself, "let the egg stay in my cap. But they'll never cheat me."

"Finished?" he asked.

"Yes."

"All right," Genka said, "but only on condition that we turn our backs to him. Let him look for the egg that way."

"Why?"

"So that you won't be able to make a sign."

"Suits me," Senka agreed.

They sat down with their backs to Akimka.

"Ready, Akimka!" Genka shouted. "If you say just one word to him, I'll quit."

"All right, all right," Senka muttered.

They sat without turning round. They heard Akimka's footsteps and his snuffling.

"Why are you sitting like this?" he asked.

"Go on, search," Genka said with elation in his heart.

He had the whip hand now! They had apparently worked this thing before. Senka had to show Akimka where the egg was hidden by a prearranged signal. They had never counted on being forced to turn round.

Let him search.

Genka watched Senka out of the corner of his eye, fearing that the latter would give Akimka a secret sign after all. But Senka sat quietly with his hands clasped on his knee. There was no way he could make a sign. He had fallen into Genka's trap. Now he would have to tell what he did the day before yesterday.

With their caps low over their eyes, the boys sat on the log without turning round. Akimka walked back and forth behind them and snuffled.

"Guess and be quick about it," Genka said. "I'm not going to wait a year!"

"Don't rush me," Akimka replied.

He was snuffling somewhere quite close to Genka's ear and before Genka knew what was happening he hit him on the cap with all his might. That same instant a sticky, stinking mass oozed down Genka's freckled face into his eyes.

Mad with rage, Genka sprang to his feet and tore the cap off his head. The mass flowed more freely and pasted up his eyes. The egg was rotten. To Genka it seemed that an unbearable stench was rising from him from head to foot.

"And you said he'd never guess," Senka said, rolling with laughter. With his usual downcast look, Akimka was drawing something in the sand with the crooked nail of his toe.

Using the edge of his shirt and a tuft of grass, Genka wiped his face and head (as always, he had left his handkerchief in the tent) and said:

"All right, you win. But next time you'll not get away with it."

"We'll see," Senka cut him short. "You think too much of yourself."

Then, altogether spitefully, he added, "Komsomols, think I care!"

Chapter 29

THE NAIL

It was a gloomy and downcast Genka that returned to the club.

There, work was in full swing. The boys and girls were covering the holes in the walls with boards, levelling the earthen floor, building a stage, fixing up the wings, hanging up curtains, putting in glass panes, and making benches. Some of the youngsters were writing slogans, drawing posters, arranging firs along the walls and hanging fir and paper flag garlands on the ceiling.

"Well, find out anything?" Misha asked.

"Not yet," Genka replied darkly.

"You didn't let the cat out of the bag?"

"No."

"What are those yellow spots on your face?"

"Where?" Genka ran his hand across his cheek. "Nothing. They took me in with the egg trick."

"And you fell for it?"

"I didn't know."

"You didn't know? You're a fine one!"

"Why didn't you warn me?"

"How could I know that you'd fall for such a cheap trick?" Genka was hurt.

"That's no reason to laugh! All right, I fell for it, so what? At any rate I was careful. Senka doesn't suspect anything. So you needn't worry."

"That is the main thing," Misha said in a conciliatory tone. "Don't take it to heart. We'll find out all we need. Meanwhile, take this poster and nail it to that wall."

Crestfallen, Genka took the poster, put a ladder up against the wall and with four nails in his mouth and a hammer in his hand climbed up.

As he drove in the nails the thought of the rebuff he had suffered never left his head. Everything had been running so smoothly. But now Senka would laugh at him. In front of everybody. A pleasant thought, indeed! {

Rubbing salt, into his wound in this fashion, he drove in one nail, then another. When he took the third nail out of his mouth, he found that he had lost the fourth nail. Where could it have gone to? He knew he hadn't dropped it. He counted the nails in the poster—there were exactly two, plus the nail in his hand. Then, with his tongue, he carefully felt along one cheek, then the other. No, the nail wasn't there!

A shiver ran down his spine: had he swallowed it?

They were small nails and could be easily swallowed. Slowly, Genka came down the ladder and carefully searched the floor. Perhaps he had dropped the nail? No, it was nowhere to be found. Genka straightened up and as he did so he felt a sharp pain in the pit of his stomach.... It lasted only for an instant. As he had thought—he had swallowed the nail. What would happen now?

His eyes wide with terror, he frantically clasped his hands to his chest, then to his stomach. He thought he could feel the nail slowly sliding down his gullet. He felt a shooting pain now in one place, now in another. He was terrified that the nail would get stuck at some turning and pierce his gullet and stomach.

"What's the matter with you?" Slava asked.

Genka gulped and, hardly breathing, whispered:

"I—I—swallowed...."

"Swallowed what?"

"A—a—nail."

This terrible news was passed on to Misha, who came up, followed by Zina Kruglova, Kit and the Bleater. In a few moments, Genka was surrounded by the whole troop.

"How did it happen?" Misha demanded.

But Genka went on gulping air and with his hand showed the path of the nail in his stomach.

"Perhaps you didn't swallow it?" Misha asked hopefully.

Genka spread out four fingers and whispered:

"I had four, only three remained."

"Slap him on the back," Zina Kruglova suggested.

"Not on your life!" the Bleater shouted. "That would only make it worse: the nail would get stuck in his intestines. An emetic is the only thing that'll help."

"An emetic?" Kit exclaimed, horrified. "You're crazy! D'you think the nail can be got out as easily as all that? It'll get stuck, you can bet on that. I remember once I swallowed a bone...."

"You and your bone," Misha interrupted him. "This is no time to talk about a bone!"

"What if we put him on his head and shake him by the legs?" suggested Sasha Cuban. "That ought to get the nail out."

While all these pleasant suggestions were being made, Genka turned his head now to one of his friends, now to another.

"Take him to the district," Longshanks advised.

"What's that?"

"The district hospital. It's in the next village."

"He'll never manage it."

"Get a horse. Ask the chairman for a cart."

Misha and Longshanks ran to the chairman of the Village Soviet. In a little while they returned with a cart. Genka was sitting in a chair and moaning, every now and then clutching at his stomach or his chest. It seemed to him that the nail was moving about his whole body, now up, now down, now to the right, now to the left....

He was carried to the cart. The artist-anarchist, Stepan Kondratyevich, was sitting in it with the reins in his hands. The chairman of the Village Soviet had told him to take Genka to the hospital. Misha went along. Before leaving, he ordered the troop to return to the club, to be careful and under no circumstances to take nails in their mouths.

Chapter 30

THE HOSPITAL

All the way to the hospital Genka groaned, squirmed, clutched his stomach and shook his head. Every jolt caused him agonizing pain. He looked up at Misha so piteously that the latter's heart tore with sympathy. He was afraid Genka would die at any moment and thought that Stepan Kondratyevich was driving too slowly and was more occupied with his own reflections.

"You needn't worry about the nail," he said. "It will be digested and that will be the end of it. What's a small nail? Nothing. I remember when I lived in Moscow and was painting the Bolshoi Theatre with a friend...."

"You painted the Bolshoi Theatre?" Misha asked doubtfully.

"I certainly did," Stepan Kondratyevich replied imperturbably. "We painted the Bolshoi Theatre and signed up the actors, conductors—the

whole works. Well, that friend of mine swallowed a spike. It was about two inches long. No joke that."

"What happened to him?"

"Nothing. He digested it. Drank two bottles of vodka a day to help get it digested. A small nail is nothing. If I were you, I wouldn't trouble a doctor over it. You're inconveniencing a lot of people and that's all."

"Are you sorry you're helping a sick person?" Misha asked in an offended tone of voice.

"I don't mind helping if a person is really sick. But this is just nonsense."

"Then why did you go?"

"Authority."

"But you don't recognize authority."

"Compulsion."

Misha remembered the boat.

"When we were on the river in your boat, the boatman Dmitry Petrovich attacked us and wanted to take it away from us."

"Fool!" the artist replied shortly.

"Who's a fool?"

"Dmitry Petrovich. And an adventurer to boot."

"Why do you call him an adventurer?"

"Because he's looking for buried treasure. These things have gone out of existence a long time ago."

Misha looked at the artist with surprise.

"Everybody has forgotten about these treasure-troves," Stepan Kondratyevich went on, "but he keeps on looking. He's mad. And so is Sofya Pavlovna."

"Who is Sofya Pavlovna?"

"The woman who lives in the manor. The house-keeper."

"So that's who she is," Misha drawled. "I thought she was a countess."

"Countess, my foot!" the artist exclaimed and lashed the horse painfully with his whip.

The hospital was on the edge of the neighbouring village. It was a big log house with a few verandahs and entrances and there were many carts around them. Peasant women were sitting on the steps of the porch or simply on the grass. Children of all ages were running about, fighting, crying and making a general uproar.

Moaning and writhing with pain, Genka climbed down from the cart and, supported by Misha, dragged himself to the hospital. Disregarding the annoyance of the people in the long queue, they went into the surgery.

The doctor, a stout man with silver-streaked hair and a tousled beard, in pince-nez with a black ribbon that he wore over his ear, was bending over a man lying on a trestle bed. All that could be seen of the patient were his legs in huge boots. The doctor turned his face towards the boys and asked sternly:

"What's the matter?"

Misha pointed to Genka.

"He's swallowed a nail." Genka could scarcely walk. He thought that all

this—the doctor and the hospital—was only a mirage and that he had quitted the world of men long, long ago.



The doctor told the man in the boots to get up, wrote out a prescription and let him go. Then, from under his pince-nez, he gave Genka a scrutinizing look.

"When did this happen?"

Genka mumbled something that was quite unintelligible.

"About an hour ago," Misha replied. "He was nailing up a poster at the club, had the nails in his mouth and swallowed one of them."

"A big nail?"

"No."

The doctor again looked at Genka. Genka read his death sentence in that look.

"Undress."

Genka began with his Young Pioneer tie. With a habitual movement of

one hand he tugged at one end of the tie, holding the knot with his other hand. As his hand closed round the knot, he felt a cold metal object in his palm.

Could it be the nail? Dumbfoundedly, Genka stared at the doctor.

"Undress quickly," the doctor said, writing something in his notebook.

"In a minute," Genka mumbled.

The metal object was in the palm of his hand but he could not make up his mind to see what it was. He was quite sure it was the nail. It could not be anything else.

There was no help for it. He would have to undress. Irresolutely, he closed his hand round the object and the last of his doubts melted. So that's where it was! He had not swallowed it after all. He had dropped it and it had got stuck in his tie. A pretty kettle of fish! There was nothing wrong with him. But how was he to admit it?

Clenching the nail in his hand, he undressed slowly. When there was nothing but the underpants left on Genka, the doctor told him to lie down.

Still clenching the nail, Genka lay down on the cold sheet. The doctor sat down on the edge of the couch and put his fingers on Genka's stomach. The cold fingers made Genka shiver. He saw the eyes of the doctor looking closely at him through the pince-nez. Did the doctor suspect that he had not swallowed the nail? Genka shut his eyes and lay still, holding the nail tight in his fist and making an effort to hide the fist under his back.

The doctor pressed his stomach lightly.

"Pain?"

"No."

The doctor pressed other parts of his stomach, but all Genka felt was the cold of his fingers.

"Raise your arms slowly," the doctor ordered, "and if you feel a pain in your stomach, say so."

Genka slowly raised his arms. To avoid suspicion, he clenched the other fist as well.

His arms were already in a vertical position. He slowly began to lower them backwards. There was no pain. Automatically, he did everything the doctor ordered, realizing that the deception would be exposed sooner or later. It would have been better if he had swallowed that nail.

"Unclench your fists," said the voice of the doctor which seemed to come from afar.

Genka unclenched one fist and vainly tried to get the nail somewhere between the fingers of his other hand. He could not do it and did not unclench the fist.

"Unclench your fists," the doctor repeated, "both of them!"

Genka suddenly got up and announced:

"I've found the nail."

Both the doctor and Misha looked at him with astonishment. Then he opened his fist.

"Here it is."

"Hm. Where was it?" the doctor asked.

"In my tie. I found the nail when I began to untie it. I suppose it dropped out of my mouth into the knot."

"Why didn't you tell me at once?"

"I wanted to make sure that it was the same nail."

"Are you sure there's no pain anywhere?"

"Yes," Genka replied happily, but he did his best not to look at Misha, who was standing grim-faced near the door.

"All right," the doctor said quite peaceably. "Bend your knees a few times."

Genka did as he was told. Then, on the doctor's orders he made a few other movements, bending and turning in different directions. He obediently did all this without understanding what the doctor wanted, for he was certain the nail was not in his stomach.

The doctor went to the wash-basin and washed his hands, then told Genka to dress and sat down at his table. He wrote down Genka's name and said:

"I am sending you to the hospital in the town."

"What for?" Genka asked, open-mouthed.

"To be X-rayed."

"But there's no nail in my stomach!" cried the unhappy Genka.

"You said you wanted a check."

"But there's nothing wrong with me."

"That makes no difference. You may have the nail where you can't feel it. Temporarily, of course. There might be complications."

The doctor turned to Misha.

"Where is your camp?"

"In Karagayevo."

"In the village?"

"No, in the manor grounds."

"I see," the doctor said, giving Misha an amused look. "Looking for buried treasure?"

"What treasure?" Misha asked in surprise. "We're not looking for anything at all."

"All right, you may go. See that you take him to town today. Understand?"

"Yes," Misha replied.

In silence they walked out of the hospital and stopped on the porch.

Genka looked about him nonchalantly as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Misha gazed at him reproachfully. "Do you realize what you did?" "What?" "You've still got the cheek to ask!"

"What have I done? I thought I swallowed a nail. What would you have done in my place? Kept your mouth shut? Said nothing about it and waited until it went right through you? I went to see a doctor. No harm in that, is there?"

"Can you tell me why you are always the one who gets into hot water?" Misha shouted at him. "It never happens to anyone but you. Now one thing, now another. You gave everybody a fright, forced us to ask the chairman for

a horse. And all for nothing! You've made a laughing-stock of *us*. I've had enough of your tomfoolery. You'll go to town and let them X-ray you."

Chapter 31

RURAL PAINTING

Genka went for the X-ray examination. But nothing was found in his stomach. He returned from town and reported to Misha.

That same evening Seva and Igor came back to the camp. They had been to Peschanaya Kosa and shown the investigator where they had found the boat. After that the investigator had allowed them to go home.

They felt they were heroes and strutted about, the camp as though they had done something extraordinary. They had not carried out their chief plan, which was to go to Italy and fight the fascists, but through their part in the Ribalin case they had put themselves in a special and exceptional position.

Although they were chock-full of pride and boasted, there was nothing important that they could tell Misha. At Peschanaya Kosa they had shown the investigator the place where they had found the boat. The investigator had measured it with a tape-measure. After that he went to the village and then to the railway station, but neither Igor, nor Seva knew why he went.

Misha was disappointed. He felt the investigator did not know his job. Why had he gone to Peschanaya Kosa instead of to the woods where those two men were hiding? Together with the boatman they had murdered Kuzmin. Misha did not doubt that for a minute.

As regards Serov, they could not say that he had treated Igor and Seva badly. The boys had slept on the hay in the shed. True, Serov's wife had not been very kind to them. She did not let them into the house, saying they would soil the floor. But Serov went to see them in the evenings and had questioned them closely.

"What did he ask you about?" Misha said, pricking up his ears.

"About everything the investigator wanted to know."

"Did you tell him?"

"Of course. He's a responsible official, you know."

The blockheads! He could not have expected anything else of them. They ran away from the camp, stirred up trouble and still had the nerve to strut about like peacocks!

"I'd come down a peg if I were you," Misha said. "You've made such a mess, that in your place people would have been as quiet as mice. Instead, you're proud of nobody knows what. Silly! Don't think you'll get off scot-free. I'll see that you don't wriggle out. At our next self-criticism meeting you'll know all about it. You'll know what all of us, think of you."

But Misha was in no hurry to set a date for the meeting. A self-criticism meeting never took less than two days. They could ill afford to spare so much time. The club had to be completed. They had finished furnishing it and now all that remained was to get it painted. The troop felt that the

painting should be entrusted to the artist-anarchist Stepan Kondratyevich.

He came to the club and for a long time stood watching the troop-at work. Then he went to Misha and asked:

"Shall I start?"

"Yes. How are you planning to go about it?"

Stepan Kondratyevich traced a circle with his arm.

"It has to be painted. All round."

Misha remembered the artist's absurdly painted cottage. For a moment the fear that he would spoil the club crept into Misha's heart. But he could not show his distrust of a person who was volunteering his services. In general, Misha felt that the assistance of the local population should be enlisted. All the same, he asked:

"How will it look?"

"Magnificent," the artist said, throwing a dull gaze at the walls, of the shed, "in the latest style. We did the Bolshoi...."

"We can't pay you anything," Misha warned. "You'll have to do it free of charge."

"Yes." The artist sighed.

"And there's not enough paint."

Stepan Kondratyevich sighed again.

"I'll throw in some of mine. There's a little left. I gave what I had to the forester, but you can't get anything back from him now."

"What forester?"

"Kuzmin. The man who was murdered."

"You say he was a forester?"

"Yes. Before the Revolution. He worked for the count. A trusted employee."

So that's what it was! Kuzmin had worked for the count. As a forester, he knew the woods well.... Again the woods. The very woods where those men disappeared with the sacks brought by the boatman. There was some mystery about those woods. And then that legend about the Goligin Brushwood Road and about the beheaded phantoms—had it not all been invented to keep people away? There was something in that. It was now clear to Misha that, he had to go and see the Goligin road for himself to find out if those men were still there and if so what they were doing.

Misha's thoughts were interrupted by Stepan Kondratyevich, who declared that he would paint the club that night. Nobody would disturb him, there would be no dust and on the whole it was his habit to work at night., But he would need the help of two boys. Misha appointed the Bleater and Seva to help him. The next day, when the troop approached the club they saw a large crowd in front of it.

What had happened? The youngsters quickened their pace. But by the smiles on the faces of the peasants, by the laughter and jokes, Misha realized that something funny rather than tragic had happened. And when he stepped inside the club he was so taken aback by what he saw that he did not know whether to cry or to laugh.

The club was painted in the wildest way imaginable: curved lines,

circles, stripes, triangles, and simply splashes of colour, some shapeless, others reminiscent of the faces of wild animals. The benches were striped like zebras. The curtain looked like the apron of a house-painter. One of the beams was black, another was red and the third— yellow. A slogan was painted on each of the beams: "Anarchy is the mother of order." "Long live pure art!" "Down with the ten capitalist-ministers!" Misha was horrified.

Stepan Kondratyevich was pacing up and down the club with a proud and independent bearing. The Bleater and Seva looked as proud and independent. They were quite serious when they told Misha that this was the latest style in art. That, they declared, was how people the world over painted. That was how Mayakovsky had painted when he was an artist. He had stopped painting like this because he had become a poet. The Bleater even made an attempt to explain the meaning of some blot, but got entangled in what he was saying and ended up without explaining anything.

In one of the groups of villagers standing in front of the club were Yerofeyev and the chairman of the Village Soviet, a young man who had recently been demobilized from the Red Army. Everybody called him Vanya, but Yerofeyev called him by his name and patronymic—Ivan Vasilyevich. He was a good man, who came from a middle-peasant family, but he did not feel sure of himself in his job and was for that reason, so it seemed to Misha, timid before the kulaks and let them do what they liked. Misha had been at one of the meetings when the chairman had spoken passionately and firmly about the common meadow where the livestock grazed. Yerofeyev had supported him at the time, but later turned everything round to suit himself and embarrassed the chairman so much that in the end Vanya gave in to him.

That was what happened now. At first, the chairman laughed at the way Stepan Kondratyevich had painted the club, but Yerofeyev said:

"It may be funny, but the money is from our pockets. How can we show this to the comrades from the gubernia or uyezd? It will all have to be redone and that means more expense. We can't afford to throw money about like that."

"It's not a lot of money," the chairman protested.

"That may be so, but it's public money," Yerofeyev said.

"It's gone and there's no use crying about it," the chairman frowned.

"That wasn't what I meant," Yerofeyev declared. "You're right, it's gone and we can't do anything about it. What I meant was that you can't trust children with this sort of thing. Can we blame Stepan Kondratyevich? He likes to paint houses, we all know that. But in this case, the Komsomol is the responsible party. They should have come to the Village Soviet and asked if Stepan Kondratyevich could be given the job. I should say the young people bit off more than they could chew. That is the bad part of it."

It was always like this. At first the chairman argued with Yerofeyev and tried to prove his point. What Yerofeyev said evidently impressed him so much that without realizing it he changed his mind. Yerofeyev was the stronger personality and the chairman could not help being influenced by him.

After what happened at the club, the chairman began to scowl at the troop and even went so far as to reprimand Misha for needlessly taking the horse for Genka.

Right after that there was another unpleasantness and all because of a childish game called "flowers."

Chapter 32

"FLOWERS"

A childish game, really! You always had to carry something green about you. Whenever somebody said, "Flowers," you had to show that bit of greenery. If you didn't, you had to pay a forfeit.

It was silly, but terribly catching. It developed into an epidemic disease, into mass hysteria, particularly among the girls. At the mention of "flowers," even the older girls, half of whom were Komsomols, acted like half-wits for whom nothing existed except this game. When any of them lost, she fulfilled the forfeit no matter how stupid it was. The boys, too, became infected. Misha noticed that Genka and Slava carried a tuft of grass about with them. Things reached such a stage that one day even Misha, quite against his will, suddenly said to Zina Kruglova, "Flowers!" Zina gazed at him with astonishment and pulled a green ribbon out of her pocket. Misha recalled himself immediately and scornfully said, "Aren't you ashamed of this childishness?" He made believe that he had only said, "Flowers!" in order to catch her at this foolish game.

And here is what all this led to.

One day, while Misha was at the Village Soviet, the telephone rang. It was a message from the uyezd centre requesting the chairman to send somebody to the neighbouring village of Borki to tell the chairman of the Borki Village Soviet that he was urgently wanted at the centre.

The chairman said, "Very well," and hung up. As everybody was out in the fields, he asked Misha to send one of his boys.

Misha went back to the camp and ordered Genka to take the message. Genka had no intention of going, but he said he would go. Catching the Bleater without "flowers," he passed the buck on to him. But the Bleater, not to be outdone, walked about the camp for a whole hour asking everybody for "flowers" until finally he trapped one of the Nekrasova sisters. The girl lost no time in passing it on to Natasha Boitsova. Natasha caught Genka and he found himself holding the bag again. Genka's second victim was Seva. To make a long story short, the message was passed on interminably until, finally, when it was already growing dark, Lara, the smallest girl in the troop, found herself obliged to take the message to Borki. She went some of the way, but the darkness frightened her and she sat down to think what she should do. In the end, she returned to the camp.

In this way, nothing was done about the chairman's request. On the next day, Misha tried to find who was to blame but soon realized that he was

tackling a hopeless task. Everybody blamed everybody else. Some of the children had had the message on their hands a few times and it was utterly impossible to sort out the muddle.

Meanwhile, the message was not delivered. Nobody went to the uyezd centre from Borki, and Ivan Vasilyevich, the chairman of the local Village Soviet, was taken to task. He was very offended.

"I thought you'd be of some help to me," he said to Misha in a morose tone of voice, "but now I see that I was wrong. You took a horse on a wild goose chase. You spoilt the club. You let me down in such a small matter as this and it's brought me trouble. Your boys took that boat, made it hard for the militia to find the track of Kuzmin's murderer and because of that everybody in the village is being questioned. I call that bad."

Misha had no reply to that. The chairman was right. But was their work in the village simply a round of mistakes? Had they not done a big job? All right, they had bungled with the painting of the club, but nobody could deny that there was a club! What about the discussions they had arranged for the village children? The village would soon have its own Young Pioneer detachment. What about the work they had put in to abolish illiteracy? Twelve people were now able to read by syllables. At first, nobody had wanted to attend the classes. People were ashamed of their illiteracy and had to be persuaded to come or to be fetched. In these conditions, it had been extremely difficult to hold the classes. But they had been held and had yielded results. In the face of all that it was really unjust to reproach them for the club and for not having taken that message to Borki.

But Misha did not try to excuse himself. It would not do to flaunt his troop's achievements, but at the same time he was not prepared to dodge the responsibility for any blame.

"Yes, it is bad," Misha agreed, "but we'll redo the club ourselves and punish those who are to blame for this Borki business. So far as the boat is concerned, all I can say is that that is the affair of the investigator and it is too early to talk about it."

That seemed somewhat to calm the chairman. But it was not¹ a matter of whether he had calmed down or not. The thing was that discipline had grown loose in the troop. Take the game of "flowers," the painting of the club. The Bleater could have reported that the anarchist was spoiling the club. Then the escapade of Igor's and Seva's. And Genka's nail. Discipline was lax, there was no denying it. He would have to tighten up on it. It had to be done now, at once.

That evening, Misha announced that there would be a self-criticism meeting in two days' time.

Chapter 33

WHAT IS SELF-CRITICISM?

At a self-criticism meeting, a Y.C.L. cell discusses its members. It is a

general meeting of the cell when anybody can get up and say what he thinks about the member up for discussion. He can speak about his merits or demerits (mostly demerits, naturally), his worth as a Komsomol and comrade, how he carries out his assignments, and his moral qualities: whether he is upright, courageous, selfless. Whoever is being spoken about has to keep silent. No protests can be made. You have to listen to what your comrades say about you, take account of their criticism and correct your ways, otherwise there will be more criticism at the next meeting.

It was not very pleasant, of course, to sit and have yourself hauled over the coals. The ones at the top of the list get it the hottest. Most of the ardour is usually spent on them. But then those at the tail-end don't come off much better: the members who have already been criticized, heave a sigh of relief and attack the members last on the list. But no personal scores are allowed. The moment it was felt that so much as a hint of a personal account was being paid off, there was a cry, "Personal score! Personal score!" They were very sensitive and irreconcilable to deception, insincerity, injustice. Besides, nobody would dare to lie here, at a meeting, in front of his comrades.

Even the best and most irreproachable members were a little afraid of these self-criticism meetings. Even those who felt they had not done anything that could be criticized. Even Misha, Slava, Zina Kruglova and Natasha Boitsova, a very kind and just girl. It was a period of anxiety for everybody. Each knew his shortcomings and each realized that his comrades knew not only these shortcomings but also many others of which he had not the slightest suspicion.

Before a meeting, each behaved in a different way. True, some remained their old selves, but others changed beyond recognition.

Take Genka. It was simply amazing to see how he changed into an innocent sheep the moment he learned there would be a self-criticism meeting. He became kind, generous, attentive and obliging. He made a special effort to get into the good books of those from whom he expected criticism. But he was usually criticized by everybody and so he tried to win everybody's favour.

He had a smile for everyone, was careful not to raise his voice, and if anybody committed an offence he was quick to come to the rescue, saying, "Everybody makes mistakes. You must be patient with other people's shortcomings." At the same time, he would give the guilty party an ingratiating look as if to say: remember, I defended you. He made up even to the glutton Kit, giving him his portion on two occasions with words to the effect that he was not hungry.

He completely dropped his imperious tone. He gave the Young Pioneers in his section no orders whatever, only saying, "If I were you, I'd do it like this...." or "It's your business, of course, but in your place I'd do this...." The gentle and well-wishing "if I were you" was now an inalienable part of his speech.

And this was Genka, bold, self-confident Genka! Nothing ever daunted him, but he was afraid of his own comrades, mortally afraid of being censured by them.

He was particularly anxious to please the Bleater, the fighter for justice. He walked about arm in arm with him and tried to get him medicines (the Bleater was in charge of the sanitation in the camp) and to make all the slovens obey him.

But it was from the Bleater that Genka got his biggest wiggling at the meeting.

Chapter 34

SELF-CRITICISM

After supper, the troop arranged themselves on a lawn in the shade of trees. Slava was elected chairman: he was fair and could be trusted to conduct a meeting calmly and tactfully.

Misha made a short introductory speech. He dwelt briefly on current affairs, said a few words about the Republic's complicated international position and about the odious intrigues of the capitalists and imperialists and, in this connection, pointed to the necessity of: increasing the responsibility of each individual member of the Y.C.L. before the collective and his own self, before his revolutionary and Komsomol conscience. The purpose of self-criticism, Misha said, was to help each Komsomol and Young Pioneer to perfect himself, to see his own defects and to rid himself of them as quickly as possible. The more so, Misha added, that in the past few days there had been cases of flagrant irresponsibility.

At this point, Slava interrupted him, pointing out that by speaking in this way Misha was setting the tone as to how certain comrades should be criticized. Therefore, as chairman, he suggested that Misha confine himself to general remarks and be as brief as he could. He could come forward with concrete remarks when one or the other of the comrades was discussed. Slava's firmness was loudly applauded. Misha never expected Slava to make such a remark to him, the leader of the troop (after all, there was his prestige to think about), but inwardly he could not help acknowledging that Slava was right: such were the rules and you had to abide by them. Grudgingly, he agreed and moved that Genka's section be discussed first. Slava put this motion to the vote. It was adopted by a clear majority, the Young Pioneers of Genka's section being the only ones to vote against it. But they were in the minority and the discussion began. Genka was the first on the list. The Bleater asked for the floor.

"Lately, Genka and I have become close friends," he said gravely. "But precisely because I am his friend, I must speak frankly about his shortcomings. His greatest fault is that he is not steady. He cannot keep himself in hand. He does and says things even when he knows they are wrong. A Komsomol ought to consider and weigh the pros and cons of his actions. Genka does not know how to consider or weigh what he does. That is why he gets into scrapes."



The Bleater reminded the meeting of the scrapes Genka had been in because of his lack of self-control, and, in conclusion, said:

"Genka has many faults, there's no getting away from that. But the shortcoming I spoke of is the biggest and he must try and overcome it. The faster he does that, the better for him."

Not a soul got up to defend poor Genka. Even Zina Kruglova, the only girl he was friendly with, jumped to her feet and lashed out at him:

"Genka is undisciplined. How can a person like him be a deputy leader? Instead of setting an example, he takes advantage of his position to break rules. We all know what his teasing of Igor and Seva led to. Then remember what happened in Moscow with Igor's grandmother? What about that stupid business over the nail?- It is high time Genka gave a thought to his prestige."

"Genka is rude," said Nadya Nekrasova.

"Genka is flighty," added Vera Nekrasova.

"Genka likes to tease people," cried Igor and Seva.

"Genka is a chatterbox and never lets anybody say anything," declared Kit.

With regret Genka thought of the two portions of porridge he had given Kit.

When Natasha Boitsova's turn came, she said:

"Genka is much too conceited and takes a lot upon himself. He is boastful and never loses an opportunity to take the credit for things. It is disgraceful to act like that. It is not modest and shows more than anything else that he is an individualist."

The last to speak about Genka was Slava.

"I think Genka's chief trouble is that he is too impulsive. He does things without thinking, that is to say, impulsively. In whatever we do, we must be guided not by impulses but by sober calculation."

Here Slava entered upon a lengthy discourse about will-power, the character, impulses, and found his way to Kant's "categorical imperative,"

about which he had read in some book on philosophy. He did not understand the book but the words "categorical imperative" caught his fancy.

In the end, Slava climbed out of the maze of philosophical reasoning and closed the discussion about Genka with the words:

"Genka faces the serious task of remaking himself. We all know that he is a good Komsomol and that he is devoted to the cause of the Revolution, but his faults prevent him from giving society the benefit that he could otherwise have given. Genka must earnestly consider what has been said about him today."

Some of the Young Pioneers of Genka's section were discussed in approximately the same spirit.

When it came to Kit's turn to face the meeting, the speakers pointed out that his gluttony was no longer a physical but a moral defect. "What can you expect from a person who thinks of nothing but food?" Igor said. "He subordinates everything to the interests of his stomach. In time, he will develop into a Philistine-glutton, whose only care will be his own welfare. Think of the Komsomols of the time of the Civil War!" he exclaimed with fervour. "Think of the Komsomols in the capitalist countries, particularly in fascist Italy! Are their minds on food? Let us suppose that there is somebody like Kit among them and that he falls into the clutches of the fascist police. They question him and torture him by not giving him food. Could Kit endure that kind of torture? Tell us, Kit, do you think you could?"

Kit hung his head.

Slava, as the chairman, noted that questions were out of order. If Igor wanted to criticize Kit he could, but if he started asking questions it would give rise to a squabble and to unnecessary argument.

"No, Kit could never endure that kind of torture," Igor went on bitterly, "and that means his craving for food is stronger than his convictions. A person like him has no business being a Komsomol. Now when Seva and I decided to go to Italy to fight the fascists..."

Slava stopped him again, telling him not to speak about himself. Others would soon do that and then if he wished he could explain why he ran away from the camp.

But when Igor and Seva came up for discussion, neither the one nor the other showed any desire to offer an explanation. When you came to think of it, what was there to explain? They had roused everybody's indignation. Were they children? Did they not realize that they would never have got to Italy and would not have licked any fascists? The whole idea was preposterous. It came from a desire to show off, to pose as heroes. Was that the quality of a Bolshevik?

"It's the kind of thing you'd expect from Socialist-Revolutionaries," Misha said. "It's petty-bourgeois individualism. It's as much as saying: I do what I want and the others can go hang themselves! What do I care about my comrades, my parents! Let them worry, let them be anxious, but I'll do what I want and that's all I care! What it boils down to is that a whim is dearer than friends and parents. They place their personal interests above

the interests of society. And the name for that is egoism, and egoism is the most despicable belch of bourgeois ideology. That is what Igor and Seva must think about!"

Chapter 35

SELF-CRITICISM

(Continued)

The next day, the meeting was resumed in the morning so that it could be finished by nightfall.

They began with Slava. He turned his functions as chairman over to Misha, naturally only for as long as he was discussed.

Genka rose to speak first.

"Slava is a good Komsomol, nobody will deny that. He is honest, just and conscientious. But," Genka frowned, "somehow he's irresolute. He can never make up his mind quickly. He doubts everything. His usual questions are: Why? What for? Is it necessary? That kind of thing won't do!" Genka waved a fist. "In everything you do you need to be firm, bold and quick. Where is Slava's will-power? His greatest drawback is that his reaction is slow," Genka looked round triumphantly. "But when there's a need, he too can come out with a high-sounding word. So there. He has to train his will-power. What should he start with? I say, physical culture. Yes, yes, don't laugh! Slava does not go in for sports and even shirks morning exercises. In this connection it is said that a healthy body makes for a healthy mind. That is what you find in books. And it should be remembered."

But all the other speakers praised Slava. He was liked in the troop. Misha, too, praised him, but added that Slava was a flabby intellectual. True, he was growing up in an intellectual family, his father was a "specialist." But he had to re-educate himself, to acquire proletarian, workingmen's qualities.

"So far as I am concerned," declared Zina Kruglova, "I don't understand what these special workingmen's, proletarian qualities are.

A person is a person regardless of whether he is a worker, an office employee or an intellectual. Ideologies can be different, but human qualities do not depend upon that. You get workingmen with human qualities inferior to those of intellectuals. So I think social origin has nothing to do with it."

"What d'you mean?" Genka cried. "Don't you know that a man's way of life determines his consciousness? The working-class consciousness is different from that of the bourgeoisie. The intelligentsia is an intermediate stratum and it is wavering." Slava was hurt.

"Does that mean I'm an intermediate stratum?" "You—no," Genka replied conciliatorily, "you are living in Soviet years. I was talking about the old intelligentsia." But Zina Kruglova insisted on her point:

"I disagree. Like all other people, Slava has his shortcomings, but his intellectual origin cannot be taken into account. Look at Genka. His origin

is proletarian, but he has incomparably more faults."

Genka sprang to his feet and declared heatedly that the discussion about him had been closed and there was no reason for returning to it. As regards the role of the intelligentsia, he fully concurred with what Misha said. Naturally, you could not fit everybody into one and the same pattern—Slava, for instance, was one of the boys—but that did not change the social essence of the intelligentsia as an intermediate stratum.

As Slava was offended, Misha considered it necessary to explain what he meant.

"Now here is what I had in mind," he said. "What does proletarian psychology boil down to? To the fact that the proletariat have nothing to lose except their chains. The bourgeoisie, meanwhile, own property and are holding on to it. That is why the proletariat are for the common cause and the bourgeoisie are against it. In their hearts, the intelligentsia support the proletariat, but because of their position they are tied up with the ruling classes. That is the cause of their wavering and hesitation. I naturally did not mean Slava, but spoke generally. Slava's psychology is one hundred per cent proletarian, but in his character he still has some traits of the flabby intellectual. As a matter of fact, I am only stating my own opinion and it is entirely up to Slava to take it or not."

The meeting continued. Most of the troop had already been discussed. There was just criticism of everybody, even of the fighter for justice himself—Baranov, otherwise known as the Bleater. The criticism against him was that he plumed himself on his fight for truth. He was transforming that fight into an end in itself. He was not so much revolted at injustice as he was attracted by the pose of a fighter for justice. It was pointed out to him that injustice should be fought with a view to abolishing it and not in order to acquire fame as an irreconcilable fighter for justice.

Misha, like everybody else, took part in the discussion. But all the time his mind was occupied with the thought whether he himself would be discussed.

The crux of the matter was that when Kolya Sevastyanov was the leader of the troop, he was never discussed. That was only natural—he was the senior.... Now the leader was Misha. That meant he ought not to be discussed. But on the other hand, he was not an adult, but a Komsomol like the others. Actually, this was sooner a small Komsomol cell rather than a troop. Had Kolya Sevastyanov been with them, Misha would have been discussed like all the others. But how was he to act under the circumstances? He had no particular desire to be discussed, not that he was afraid of being criticized but the mere fact of being discussed would show that though he was the leader of the troop he was not of the same calibre as, say, Kolya Sevastyanov. On the other hand, he did not see how he could prevent himself from being discussed. That would not be democratic and the troop would take it as conceit. The best course would be to let them decide themselves. They might not be intending to discuss him at all, for it was an unwritten rule that leaders were never discussed. Even if they decided to discuss him, there was nothing, he felt, they could criticize him

for. He was fair to everybody and had no favourites. And if he had been exacting at times, it had been his duty as leader.

But the anticipation that he would not be criticized was not justified. When the discussion was over, Slava said:

"Comrades, we have come to the end of our list. There's only Misha left. He is our leader and, as a rule, we don't discuss the leader of the troop. But Misha is one of us, our class-mate and a member of our Komsomol cell. What shall we do? What do you think, Misha?"

"Let the troop decide," Misha replied, not without the secret hope that everybody was tired and would be glad to have the meeting closed.

But everybody except Kit, who was ravenously hungry and wanted his supper, was in favour of discussing him. Kit was afraid to speak openly of his hunger after having been criticized for gluttony and so he proposed that Misha should not be discussed. But the others were against that and Kit threw a sad glance at the mess-tins lying near the dead fire.

Zina asked for the floor first.

"I had not planned to speak about Misha," she said, "but his lack of modesty surprised me."

Misha turned an amazed look at the girl.

"He was asked whether he thought he should be discussed," she went on. "I expected him to say, 'Of course. I am no different from the others.' Instead, he said, 'Let the troop decide.' With those words, he put himself in a special position, detached himself from the collective. I call that immodest. Misha must realize that though he is the leader of our troop, he is a Komsomol like the rest of us. And there is no reason at all why he should put himself above us."

Misha gave a wry smile, but in his heart he knew that the accusation was just.

He knew he should have said unreservedly that everybody should be discussed. But he had tried to dodge criticism. That showed he had to weigh every word he said. You could not put anything over the troop.

The Bleater took the floor after Zina.

"We have known Misha for a long time," he said. "We know him well, both his good points and his drawbacks. We now see him in a role that is new for him—in the role of leader of our troop. On the whole, we must admit that he is coping with his duties quite satisfactorily. He neither puts on airs nor shows off. But he has one big shortcoming and that is that he likes to have secrets with Genka and Slava. This conspiring estranges him from the collective, places him above it. We all know that last year, Misha, Genka and Slava solved the riddle of the dirk, but that does not mean they have to have secrets now as well."

"They're always conspiring at meetings of the *active*," Kit grumbled. "And then he makes allowances for some people."

"Who, for instance?"

"Genka, that's who."

"Well...."

Misha got up and said:

"Now, look here. Kit is wrong about Genka. I never make exceptions, the more so in Genka's case. About the secrets—there is some truth in that. But to be frank, it's hard not to have secrets. Think back to that business over the dirk. If I had not kept it secret I'd never have discovered anything."

"That was different," Natasha Boitsova cut in. "At that time none of us were Young Pioneers or Komsomols. But now the situation has changed."

"That is true again," Misha agreed, "and that is why I shall let you all in on the secret the Bleater spoke about. My sole condition is that it must be treated as a secret." He looked round and lowered his voice. "You all know why Igor and Seva went to Peschanaya Kosa with the investigator. The fact is that we're trying to save Longshanks' brother. We believe that he is innocent," Misha's voice fell to a whisper. "We have grounds for suspecting the boatman. There must be a reason why he attacked us. But everything has to be checked. That is why you must not breathe a word of this to anyone. It is our secret. I repeat, it is now the secret of the whole troop and nobody else must know about it." Misha straightened up and continued in a normal tone of voice, "Now that the self-criticism meeting is over, we must all take account of what has been said about us and try to turn over a new leaf. Each of us must aim to be a real Communist, a real Bolshevik, and if we do not train ourselves for that now, we shall never attain our goal. Scientists say that a person's character takes final shape by the time he is eighteen. That leaves us with not much time to re-educate ourselves and we must hurry. At this meeting we criticized each other. But all of us are members of one Komsomol family, and those of us who have not yet joined the Y.C.L. will do so in the autumn."

Chapter 36

THE INVESTIGATOR COMES TO THE CAMP

Misha did not tell the troop everything. He only shared his suspicions about the boatman, saying nothing about the "countess," Serov and the bronze bird. But what he said was sufficient. Now everybody burned with the desire to help Nikolai and to expose the boatman. But at the moment there was nothing they could do for Nikolai, so they transferred their solicitude to his family—to Maria Ivanovna and Longshanks.

The troop helped them in every way they could. They worked in the field and in the vegetable plot and helped about the house. They spoke of clubbing together to buy a cow, but that proved to be beyond their means. They shared their meagre rations with Maria Ivanovna, while Longshanks began to take his meals regularly with the troop. The girls did most of all this work, but to make up for that the boys dogged the boatman's footsteps. They got to know everything he did. Significance was attached to wherever he went or whatever he did and Misha found himself receiving continuous reports about the man's movements. In the end Misha got so fed up with this that he forbade the boys to go anywhere near the boatman or the boat

station. But try to stop youngsters! That was doubly impossible because soon the investigator arrived and that sent a thrill of excitement through the entire village.

The investigator went to the Village Soviet and summoned quite a few people for questioning: the boatman, Yerofeyev, some of the peasants and even the artist Stepan Kondratyevich. Then he went to the camp, allegedly to have a talk with Igor and Seva. Allegedly, because he hardly asked anything. His only question to Igor was: "How are you keeping?" To which Igor replied that he was keeping very well. Seva was feeling ill and was lying in one of the tents. The investigator looked in for a moment and walked away from the tent with the words: "Since he is ill, let him sleep," although Seva had no intention of going to sleep and had sat up when he saw the investigator.

The investigator stayed in the camp for a long time. Misha told him that its territory was confined to a small lawn, but he went round the whole park. He stayed around the camp for such a long time and asked for so many details about it that the thought crossed Misha's mind that he suspected some of the troop of murdering Kuzmin.

The investigator asked about the troop's routine: when they got up, when they went to sleep, when they went for their walks and games and who stayed behind 5 whether anybody was on duty at night and what the route of the rounds was. Misha took him over the route.

On the whole, this little man behaved very strangely: he carefully inspected all the paths, examined the bushes and, so it seemed to Misha, even sniffed at the trees. Misha could not understand what interested him here. The boatman was with his boats and those men were in the woods, but here he was nosing out goodness knew what.

"Perhaps you'll go over the woods as well?" Misha asked sarcastically.

"It's a big woods," the investigator replied calmly, "and you can't very well look it over."

"That is exactly why it is easier to hide there."

Continuing his inspection of the path, the investigator said:

"But they are only your suspicions."

"What do you mean?"

"Your suspicions about the boatman and the men in the woods."

"But you only suspect Nikolai Ribalin and yet you've arrested him."

"There is evidence against him but none against the people you suspect."

"All the same, Nikolai is not guilty," Misha declared.

"Nobody says he is. We have evidence and that is why we are holding him." Then he added mysteriously, "Perhaps it's better for him that we're holding him in town. Meanwhile, those men you're talking about are digging in the woods. Let them go on digging."

"What are they looking for?" Misha asked, astonished that the investigator knew about the men.

The investigator laughed.

"They're probably looking for what people usually look for in a woods: buried treasure. I was born in these parts and as long as I can remember

there has always been somebody digging for treasure. At one time the ground was dug up to such an extent that the peasants did not have to plough it. The count was a rich and eccentric man. He owned diamond fields in the Urals, so people began to say that there is hidden treasure here. Nobody has ever found anything. But the belief persists."

"Perhaps Kuzmin knew where the treasure was hidden and was killed because he would not tell," Misha suggested.

"That was not the motive," the investigator said. "On the contrary, if he knew they would have protected him in the hope that sooner or later he would share his secret. The only thing is that there is no buried treasure here."

"Then why did the boatman attack us?"

"It's difficult to say," the investigator said, shrugging his shoulders. "He claims he did it because he thought you had Kuzmin's boat. He's lying, of course. But that is neither here nor there. We know the boatman for an old offender. He specializes in foreign currency and precious stones. But he is not a murderer. No, I don't think he'd kill anybody, especially as he's just out of gaol."

Misha did not know what to think. He was disconcerted. Here was a known, thief and confirmed criminal at large and nobody seemed to care.

As though reading Misha's mind, the investigator said:

"The law is the law. At the moment there is nothing to put him into prison for. But tell me, did you see a stranger, a man of middle age, not a local inhabitant, on the estate grounds?"

"I don't think so."

"Think," the investigator urged. "Perhaps you did see somebody who'd fit that description—accidentally, just a glimpse. Here, on the river or in the village. Perhaps some of your troop saw him?"

Misha searched his memory, but he knew for certain that no stranger had been seen by him or any of his troop.

"No, nobody saw a stranger here. We know all the local people."

"Well, all right," the investigator said, cutting short the conversation. "I just thought I'd ask."

Chapter 37

THE BOYS FIND THEY HAVE TO GO TO THE WOODS

When the investigator left, Misha told Genka and Slava of the conversation he had had with him.

Genka said that the investigator was not worthy of his calling and should confine himself to catching poachers and not murderers. He was of the opinion that they should pay no attention to the man and try to unravel the mystery themselves, prove Nikolai's innocence and get evidence to convict the boatman and his accomplices. In short, they had to go to the woods.

But Slava was of a somewhat different opinion.

"Our trouble is that we are not going about this thing scientifically. Remember how it was with the dirk? We went to a library, did some serious research and figured it all out. But what are we doing now? I'll tell you. We are letting ourselves be guided by rumours: the count was very rich, he owned mines in the Urals, people believe there is treasure buried in the woods, and so forth. But these are only rumours. We need scientific proof. Who were the Karagayev counts? What did they really own in the Urals? What started the rumour about the hidden treasure? That is what we have to find out. We have to turn to primary sources. Then we shall not walk about in the dark as we're doing now."

Misha thought for a moment and said:

"One thing does not preclude the other: we'll learn what we can from books and find out what those men are doing in the woods. So, Slava, go to Moscow and get all the materials you can at the Rumyantsev Library. Incidentally, it is time we sent to the parents for supplies."

Slava was not particularly keen on going for the stores.

"I can't be at the library and collect supplies at the same time. I can't tear myself in two."

"That's all right. Take Kit along. He'll help. While you'll be in the library he will go round for the supplies."

"I suppose I'll manage with Kit," Slava agreed.

"That's settled then. Meanwhile, Genka and I will go to the woods. Not now, but when you return from Moscow. Of course, we could take the whole troop and prove that there are no phantoms, no headless counts. But if we do that we might scare the bandits away. They'll only go somewhere else and we'll never find out anything. So what we must do is to let one or two of us go. And we must take Longshanks with us. Nobody else knows the way to the Goligin Brushwood Road. He will, of course, refuse to come, but we'll persuade him."

Slava and Kit took the train for Moscow, while Misha went to see Longshanks. Longshanks was at home, squaring stakes and propping up the fallen wattle.

"Doing chores?"

"I have to."

"Any news from your brother?"

"What news can there be? He's in gaol."

"Listen, Longshanks," Misha said, "I have another plan. If we carry it out we'll prove that your brother is innocent."

"We've already tried to do that," Longshanks sighed, "and went down the river in a boat. But nothing came of it."

"Still, we proved that somebody had taken Kuzmin's boat. The investigator himself says that the evidence against Nikolai is questionable. And now, if you help us, we'll be able to prove much more. You'll see."

"What do I have to do?"



"Did you know that Kuzmin had been employed as a forester by the count?"

"How could I know that?"

"Well, I'll tell you. He was a forester on the Karagayevo estate. I know that for certain."

"What of it?"

"If he was a forester, that means he had some relation to the woods. Isn't that right?"

"I suppose so."

"Now then, who's hiding in the woods? The men the boatman brought the sacks for. Right?"

"I suppose so," Longshanks repeated, trying to concentrate in order to understand what Misha was driving at.

"That means," Misha concluded, "that there is some connection between the murdered forester and the men in the woods."

Although the effect and the premise were poles apart, Longshanks thought the argument convincing. Perhaps it was because he knew nothing about logic.

"That's true," he said, opening his mouth in wonder.

"There, you see," Misha said, hurrying to strengthen the impression he had made, "that means we have to find out if those men are really in the woods and, if they are, what they are doing there. If we do that we'll clear everything up."

"How will we find out?"

"Very simply. By going to the woods at night."

"You mean to the Goligin Brushwood Road?" Longshanks asked, terrified.

"What makes you think that? No, we'll not go as far as that."

"Not for anything!" Longshanks declared. "Nothing in the world will make me go. Let's not talk about it any more."

Misha had been prepared for this. But he knew that it was hopeless going

to the woods without Longshanks. He would only lose his way at night.

"I never thought you'd refuse to get your brother out of a hole," he said.

"If I knew that that would help him. But I don't know."

"It's a dead certainty," Misha insisted. "Just think. Here's your brother in danger of being sentenced to death and you don't want to lift a finger to help him. I'm an outsider and yet I want to do something—I'm not afraid to go to the woods at night. But you're his brother and you're showing the white feather. Aren't you ashamed?"

Longshanks was silent.

"Think of your mother. Look how she's wasting with grief. She is, isn't she?"

"Yes," Longshanks replied dismally.

"There, you see! And him only under investigation. What'll happen if they condemn him? She'll go mad with grief. Aren't you sorry for her? Oh, you!"

"I'm not saying I won't go," Longshanks said, "but I won't go further than the brushwood road. That's as far as I'll go."

"That's fine. You get us there, we'll do the rest ourselves."

"Who else is going?"

"Genka. Only don't tell anybody."

"Why should I?"

"Not even your mother, understand?"

"Yes."

"We'll go tonight."

"Tonight?"

"Why put it off? Be at the camp in the evening. We'll start out as soon as everybody is asleep."

"All right, I'll be there," Longshanks promised and returned to his chores.

Chapter 38

SLAVA'S INVESTIGATIONS

Slava returned from Moscow late in the afternoon. "The counts Karagayev," he said, "were related to the famous Demidov family. There lived in Tula a blacksmith named Demid Antufyev. His son was gunsmith to Peter the Great. For that, Peter gave him concessions in the Urals, raised him to the rank of the nobility and gave him the name of Demidov. The daughter of one of the Demidovs married Count Karagayev."

"Who's interested in that?" Genka said, making a face. "Shut up and listen. The Demidovs were the richest family in Russia. Even princesses were given in marriage to them. Anatoly Demidov married one of Napoleon's nieces." "You're stretching it there."

"I swear I'm not. To be equal to the honour, Anatoly Demidov bought the principality of San Donato in Italy and came to be called the prince of San Donato."

This was something even Misha could not believe, although he knew that flights of fancy were not a weakness of Slava's. But there was the possibility it was the invention of some author and Slava was now passing it on as authentic data. How could a person buy a whole principality, a kingdom, one might say? But Slava insisted on this.

"If you don't believe me," he said in an offended tone of voice, "go to the Urals. You'll find a railway station called San Donate."

"You needn't feel sore about it."

"I'm not. But if you had spent a whole day at the Rumyantsev Library in this heat, you'd also feel hurt."

"All right, go on with the story," Misha said in a placating tone.

"Well then. The Demidovs were very rich. They owned factories and mines in the Urals. And they were terrific cranks. One of them, Prokofy, for example, threw a party in Petersburg at which there was such hard drinking that five hundred people died."

"Another tall story!" Genka squealed and slapped his knees.

"It's the truth. While on a visit in England, this Prokofy took offence at something. He went back to Russia and bought up all the hemp so that the English would not get it. Hemp was their main item of import from Russia, and in this way he taught them a lesson."

"On his own money."

"What was money to him? There was another Demidov, Pavel, who in 1835 gave Nicholas I a diamond worth exactly half a million roubles."

"He must have been a famous toady," Misha noted.

"A little stone and worth half a million roubles in gold?" Genka said, voicing his disbelief again. "A bit too expensive that!"

"Yes, half a million," Slava continued. "It was the famous Sansy diamond and it has an interesting history. It was brought from India about five hundred years ago and belonged to Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy. Charles was killed in battle and the diamond was picked up by a Swiss soldier. The soldier did not know what the diamond was worth, thought it was simply a beautiful stone and sold it to a priest for one guilder, one rouble, in other words. This priest was no fool and sold the diamond to Antonio of Portugal. Besides being a king, Antonio was also an astute businessman and unloaded the diamond for a hundred thousand francs on the French Marquis de Sansy. Since then it has been known as the Sansy diamond. Now listen to what happened after that. Sansy's servant, who was taking the diamond to his master, was attacked and killed by robbers. But before he was killed, he swallowed the diamond. Sansy had the corpse opened and found the diamond in the stomach."

"A merry story!" Genka noted, putting his hands on his stomach and feeling it.

"After that," Slava went on, "kings began to profiteer with the diamond again. Sansy sold it to James II of England, James II sold it to the French king Louis XIV, then it passed on to Louis XV. It was sold and resold many times until finally Pavel Demidov bought it as a present for Nicholas I in 1835. That's the story of the diamond."

The boys fell silent. Then Misha said:
 "I can see that you did some serious study. But how does this tie up with the estate?"
 "By the fact that one of the Demidov girls married Karagayev."
 "Well, what of it?"
 "The Sansy diamond may have been part of her dowry."
 "But you've just told us that Demidov gave the diamond to Nicholas I."
 "He might have given him an imitation. In those days, you must remember, everything was based on fraud."
 Genka whistled.
 "You're wrong there. Nobody ever pulled a fast one on Nicholas I and his Benkendorf."
 "You see, Slava," Misha said, "of course, it is difficult to suppose that the diamond found its way to the count. But let's assume that that was the case. What does it show?"
 "Don't you see?" Slava said, feeling hurt. "Quite possibly, it is what the men are looking for. Everybody says that people have been looking for buried treasure in these parts for years. Perhaps they're hunting for treasure now as well."
 "Perhaps," Misha agreed. "And that only shows that we have to go to the woods. Whether it is for this stone or not, it is a fact that they're looking for something. And when people look for treasure they don't stop at murder. For us it is important to find out who killed Kuzmin and thereby prove Nikolai's innocence."
 "I wasn't objecting. I only told you what they are looking for."
 "Well, that's fine," Misha said. "That means we're going to the woods tonight."

Chapter 39

THE CAMP-FIRE

Naturally, it was impossible to conceal their plans from the rest of the troop. But everybody was aware that this was more than a secret: if it reached the boatman that Misha, Genka and Longshanks were going to the woods he might follow and kill them. He and those men of his were quite capable of that. Hadn't they killed Kuzmin?

The expression on the faces of all the youngsters was at once grave, mysterious and even a little solemn. It was the kind of expression people wear when they are faced with an important and, especially, dangerous undertaking. The troop comported themselves at their best and everybody endeavoured to please Misha and Genka, for nobody knew in what shape they would return or whether they would return at all. Misha grew so tired of their pitying glances that he went to the riverside and sat in his favourite spot. He liked to sit there in the evenings and watch the flaming sun set behind the distant hills.

Moreover, Misha had another secret, a tiny secret that belonged to him alone: he wrote poetry.

It was something he had started recently. At one time he thought poetry was a frivolous occupation. It was different when it was written by real poets, say Pushkin, Lermontov or Nekrasov. Or by modern poets like Mayakovsky and Bezymensky. That was real poetry. What youngsters wrote was nothing but rhymed words, and badly rhymed at that. Misha's attitude to school poets had always been one of irony. It was a different thing when poetry was written for the wall newspaper or to commemorate a famous date, for the wall newspaper could do without poetry. He appreciated the need for popular verse for the *Blue Blouse*—it sharpened criticism of shortcomings. But he could not stand "mood" poetry, just as he could not stand the "moods" themselves.

Morally unstable chaps, who kept away from social life, usually had "moods." As a matter of fact, you got cases of "moods" among Komsomols as well, but they were rare. A fellow with a "mood" went about looking sad and dispirited, with a hangdog air about him. He looks at everything sceptically and everything he sees seems petty, insignificant and uninteresting. To such a fellow even life itself does not seem to be worth while living. His speech is full of philosophical sayings like "life is short and dull," "everything is transient," "everything repeats itself," and "we've got to take all life can give us." On the whole, all that was stuff and nonsense. Such a "despondent" usually talked about loneliness, about people never understanding him and recited decadent verses. Besides, he wrote decadent verses himself—about the world being enigmatic, about the transience of life and other things of the same sort.

Alexander Ivanovich, the headmaster of Misha's school, once said that "moods" were the inevitable companions of adolescence. Alexander Ivanovich was, of course, a clever man and an experienced teacher, but some of his ideas were old-fashioned. What was this adolescence?⁵ It was an age like any other. Misha was firmly convinced that "moods" were nothing but a manifestation of moral instability. That was why decadent verses were written. As soon as a person began to write poetry, it meant he was getting "moods."

Then, quite unexpectedly to himself, Misha began to write poetry. To be exact, he started writing one poem and he was still at it. He could not find the rhymes for the last two lines. Naturally, it was not decadent but genuinely revolutionary.

It came to him when he was sitting on the bank of the Utcha. The crimson sun slowly disappearing behind the hills in the distance brought back the memory of the tiny railway station where the adventure of the dirk ended, the lights of the disappearing troop train, Red Army soldiers, Polevoi, and the poster depicting a worker breaking with his sledge hammer the chains fettering the globe....

Suddenly, one rhyme, then another formed in his mind.... After almost two weeks' labour, Misha produced a poem which he knew was inferior but which he liked very much. He hoped that in due course he would finish the

last two lines.

Try as he would, he could not make those last two lines fit. He could not get the rhyme.

He hunted for the rhyme in the evenings, when he sat by the camp-fire.

That evening, the camp-fire was unlike any other. The usual conversation could not get started. Nobody joked, nobody told funny stories. Zina Kruglova told the troop of an amusing answer a peasant woman had given at the abolition of illiteracy class, but nobody laughed. The troop was conscious of how responsible the moment was. Misha found himself in a solemn, romantic mood and longed to recite his poem. At the same time, he felt ashamed: a troop leader writing silly verse. But the poem was on the tip of his tongue and at last he could contain himself no longer and said:

"I have a feeling that we'll find something very important on the Goligin Brushwood Road. It will help us not only to clear Nikolai but also to solve a mystery. That feeling brought the affair of the dirk to my head: Polevoi, Nikitsky and all the others. And somehow without my knowing it I composed a poem. If you like, I'll recite it for you."

There was unanimous approval. Misha rose to his feet and, a little nervous and afraid that he would forget a line, recited his poem.

The troop listened in silence, a silence that reigned for some time after Misha had finished his recitation.

"But where's the end?" asked Genka, who was the first to speak.

"There's no end yet," Misha replied.

Suddenly he felt terribly ashamed. It seemed to him that his verses were bad, faulty, inartistic. He saw that the metre was wrong. And the rhyme was dreadful. It was stiff, high-flown and altogether unemotional. He shouldn't have recited them! What made him do it? What? He was not intending to be a poet. And all his friends were silent. They knew that the verses were bad but were not saying so out of respect for him. Why had he started all this! His hand stole into his pocket and tore the slip of paper with the poem into tiny pieces.

"It's not bad at all," Slava said. "Only there's no end and in places the metre is wrong. The first and third lines do not rhyme."

"That isn't necessary," Zina remarked.

"But desirable. Another thing—each line has a different number of syllables."

"But the idea is good," Genka said. "The minute I heard it, I remembered the railway station, the troop train and Commissar Polevoi. The reason you are criticizing it, Slava, is because you did not see it all. But Misha and I did. Ain't I right, Misha?"

"Yes," Misha said. "But you don't know why I wrote the poem. All of you looked so glum that I decided to liven you up a bit. I know the poem is third-rate, but I wanted to cheer you up and put some life into our dull camp-fire. So I composed the poem on the spur of the moment."

"You mean just now?" Genka asked sceptically.

"When do you think? I composed it as I went along." Misha stood up.

"That's that! Turn in now, everybody, to your tents. And remember: nothing

is going to happen to us. We'll be back soon. See that there's no panic. If we're not back by morning, you can look for us in the woods, near the Goligin Brushwood Road."

Chapter 40

DANGEROUS EXPEDITION

The camp grew still. Misha, Genka and Longshanks crept silently out of their tents and quickly made for the woods.

A full moon was shining down on the sleeping camp. It was so light that Misha could distinctly see the crowns of the trees. The sky above them was blue and the stars were out.

"How do you want to get to the woods: by the river-bank or across the meadows?" Longshanks asked in a whisper.

"The river-bank, past the boat station," Misha replied, also speaking in a whisper.

The small figures moved along a field path leading from the camp to the river. Longshanks was in front, with Misha following him and Genka bringing up the rear. Genka had fallen asleep in his tent and now he was dragging behind his friends, yawning and looking *'very* miserable because he was feeling drowsy. He was a brave lad, but he loved to sleep. .

Some distance away from the river, Misha told his friends to wait and stealthily crawled up to the boat station. It was bathed in moonlight. The boats were floating on the water, looking like black, sleeping fish. But there was nobody around. It was quiet. No voices, nor splashes could be heard.

Misha crawled back to his friends and they moved on. ! It was about five kilometres to the woods. The road at first hugged the river-bank and then went across fields. The light from the moon made everything look fantastic and mysterious. Something rustled in the wheat. Furtive little animals darted across the road.

Two green eyes appeared in front and then vanished.

"It's a hare," Genka whispered, shaking off his drowsiness.



"A hare or a cat," Longshanks said.

The woods loomed up before the boys—unexpectedly black, sombre and huge.

"Where to now?" Longshanks asked in a trembling voice. He was still hoping that Misha's ardour would cool and he would turn back.

But that was the farthest away from Misha's thoughts.

"Take us to the swamp, only not by this path but by another. Make as little noise as possible."

Following Longshanks, the boys skirted round the fringe of the woods and entered it.

At once it became dark. Moonlight was struggling through the leafy tops of the trees and trickling on to the path in slender beams. The knotty roots of the trees lying across the path looked like black snakes rolled up in deep slumber.

The woods were alive with nocturnal sounds. Unseen birds—nightjars or bats—were flying between the trees. Every now and then the boys heard the crackle of a dry branch, as though somebody were creeping up to them. Each time they heard that sound, Misha and Genka stopped instinctively. But Longshanks marched on and Misha and Genka moved after him. They knew that so long as Longshanks did not stop there was no danger.

They walked on in this fashion for quite a long time. Misha had completely lost his bearings. Without Longshanks, they would never find their way out. It was beyond Misha how Longshanks knew where to go.

In the meantime, the woods were getting sparser, the trees lower and shorter. Finally, the boys found themselves in a clearing.

Longshanks stopped and turned to Misha. In the moonlight his face looked deathly pale.

"The swamp's a minute's walk from here and the Goligin Brushwood Road is there," Longshanks whispered, his voice shaking.

"Will you go?" Misha asked quietly.

Longshanks shook his head.

"All right. Stay here and wait for us. You're not afraid?"

Longshanks nodded.

"Which way must we go?"

Longshanks pointed to the right and whispered:

"Keep to the edge of the woods. When you get to the four oaks, turn to the left. You'll find a cutting and it will take you right up to the swamp. That is where the brushwood road begins. I'll wait for you here." He sat down by the trunk of a birch and leaned back against it. ¹

Misha and Genka moved on, carefully keeping close to the trees so that they could not be seen. The moon was shining from the direction of the clearing and the boys' shadows merged with the shadows of the trees.

Suddenly, Genka seized Misha by the arm.

"Quiet! Can you hear?"

Flattening themselves against a tree, the boys looked round. Misha too thought he heard someone creeping up towards them. They listened. There was no further sound.

But the moment the boys started off they again heard something moving behind them. They stopped. A branch crackled softly underfoot. It seemed to Misha and Genka that the woods were teeming with mysterious beings, who were furtively closing in on them. They felt lonely, surrounded by enemies. Genka pressed closer to Misha. Misha heard the thumping of Genka's heart. He was a deal frightened himself and had it not been for Genka, before whom he could not betray cowardice, he would have taken to his heels.

So they stood, barely breathing, and listening hard. They thought they heard weird sounds, rustling, cautious footsteps, the crackling of boughs, the whispering of people, and it seemed to them that they saw shadows moving across the fields, on the fringe of the woods, between the trees.

"Let's go back," Genka said, forcing the words through his teeth.

"Scared?" Misha whispered back.

Genka nodded.

"Yes."

With gladness in his heart, but with a look which showed he was yielding only because Genka was afraid, Misha shrugged his shoulders and noiselessly began to make his way back.

But hardly had he made a step than he saw the outline of a man standing behind a tree. He froze in his tracks. The figure emerged from the shadow of a tree. It was Longshanks. So that was who had been creeping after them! What a nut! He had made their hair stand on end for nothing.

"It was frightening to sit there all alone," Longshanks said in a low voice.

"But why the hell...." Genka began irately, but in actual fact he was tingling with joy to have someone to blame his fright on.

Misha silenced him with a sign. He too was mad at Longshanks, but this was neither the time nor the place to speak about it: they might be heard.

The boys now felt more confident. Now that Longshanks was with them both Misha and Genka felt they could not afford to show the least sign of

fear. Misha again led the way to the Goligin Brushwood Road. Genka and Longshanks kept close behind him.

As before, they moved in silence, keeping in the shadow of the trees. They reached the cutting and if Longshanks had not been with them, Misha would never have guessed that it was a path, so thickly was it overgrown with young firs.

With a gesture, Misha ordered Longshanks to go forward and show the way. The latter glanced plaintively at him, but obeyed, and although he felt Misha's breath behind him, he kept glancing back as if to make sure that Misha was there.

When they had covered another kilometre, the woods gave way to a sparse thicket of low trees. The smell of decay coming from the swamp grew stronger. The ground grew miry and yielded underfoot.

Longshanks suddenly stopped and looked closely at the ground. Misha and Genka also bent forward. There was a deep hole about a metre wide and two metres long with a mound of fresh earth around it.

The boys peered into the gloom. Some distance away they saw another hole, then a third.

Longshanks lifted his hands to show that the holes were not here before.

A short walk brought the boys to the end of the cutting.

Longshanks halted and pointed with a quaking hand.

"The brushwood road."

The moon was illumining a dark, undulating swamp. What looked like logs or cut-down trees were sticking out here and there. A milky mist hung over the swamp, forming uncanny moving figures. Now and then the boys caught sight of moving lights—green, blue, yellow. Although Misha knew that they were only swamp lights and the milk-white figures resembling shrouded corpses was just the evaporation rising from the swamp, he shuddered with alarm. Genka and Longshanks shivered so violently that they could hardly keep on their feet.

The boys stood in dead silence, petrified by the terrifying picture of the swamp at night. They felt that one of these white, shifting phantoms would draw near to them at any moment and they would see the dead count with his ghastly bearded head in his hands.

Suddenly, from only a short distance away, a hollow thumping came at regular intervals. It was as though somebody were hammering under the ground. A new spasm of fear shot through Longshanks and he dropped to the ground, hiding his head between his knees.

Misha and Genka also sat down. It was not terror, as they later recounted, that made them sit down, but a fear that the people making these sounds might see them. They were positive that they were human beings, for neither Misha nor Genka believed in ghosts.

The thumping started again. Misha listened. After he got over his first fright he quickly realized that the thumping was not coming from under the ground or from the swamp, but from somewhere to the right, from the woods just a little away from them.

Pressing a finger to his lips, he signed to his friends not to move and

then, bending close to the ground, crept in the direction of the strange sounds. But Genka crawled after him and Longshanks followed. Nothing could now make Longshanks remain behind.

The boys covered some two hundred paces. The thumping grew louder. It was now quite clear to them that somebody was digging nearby. A moonbeam shone between the trees. Carefully, Misha parted the branches.

Before them the boys saw a tiny glade in the middle of which was a hole. There were two mounds of earth along its edges. Near the hole sat two men. They were smoking.

Misha and his friends were only a few paces away. It was amazing that the men had not heard them approaching.

They smoked in silence. Although it was hard to recognize people in moonlight, Misha instantly saw that they were the pair to whom the boatman had turned over the sacks. What were they digging for in the woods? Possibly, the holes Longshanks had stumbled across had also been made by them.

Then one of the men spat on his stub, threw it away, stood up, took his spade and resumed digging. The other man did the same. Neither said a word.

Once again the stillness was broken by the thumping of the spades.

Misha made a warning sign to Genka and Longshanks and noiselessly began to crawl back. Genka and Longshanks inched along after him.

In a few minutes, three small, nimble shadows were darting along the edge of a path leading back to the camp.





Part IV

MUSEUM OF REGIONAL STUDIES

Chapter 41

YEROFEYEV

The youngsters exulted at the success of their expedition. The two strangers *were* in the woods. The suspicion that there was a gang in the woods had proved to be right, otherwise why were the strangers hiding. The boatman was, undoubtedly, their leader. And, of course, they were the people who had murdered Kuzmin.

True, they were digging for something all over the woods. Perhaps it was treasure that they were looking for, after all, but the investigator, the doctor and the artist had scoffed at the very idea that there was any buried treasure. That made it all the more probable that they were the murderers of Kuzmin. All that now remained was to prove it.

But how? The investigator paid no attention to what Misha and his friends said. It might be that he wanted to prove Nikolai's guilt at all cost? That was hard to believe, but certain circumstances tended to strengthen Misha's suspicions that that was so.

When the investigator came to the village he had had a long talk with Yerofeyev. Oh the next day, Misha had seen Yerofeyev in Long-shanks' home.

He was sitting on a bench, every now and then drawing from a hip pocket a large flower-patterned handkerchief that looked more like a small table-cloth and wiping first his red, wrinkled neck, then his forehead and, lastly, his glasses. Without the glasses, his eyes were small, red, helpless.

Then he put on his glasses and said:

"Maria Ivanovna, we must think as God commands and as He commands we must live. The community will help you and you must help the community."

"What can a poor woman like me do?" Maria Ivanovna said sadly. She was sitting at the table with her head resting on her hands.

"You can go to the prison and talk to your son. Why is he putting innocent people in an awkward position?"

"Is he accusing anyone?"

"No, but neither is he admitting his own guilt," Yerofeyev said sternly and impressively. "That is why they are looking for other people to pin the charge on. Before you know it an innocent man may be convicted. We had the investigator here wanting to know who took the boat. Who can tell? Some boy, perhaps. But suspicion has fallen on the whole village, on all the people here. It is not the boat, but the fact that a man was killed, that matters."

"Perhaps my Nikolai never killed him," Maria Ivanovna said despondently.

"Then who did? They were alone." Yerofeyev sighed. "No, he committed a sin and he must confess. It is evil. He has brought trouble to the whole village, to all of us. Is that the right thing to do? Most likely they had an argument and Nikolai did not know what he was doing. They won't be very strict with him, especially as he's a poor peasant. Soviet power is lenient to poor folk. In a year's time he might be pardoned."

"How can he take somebody else's sin upon himself?" Maria Ivanovna said.

"It will be a sin if he does not repent," Yerofeyev said. "Innocent people are being worried because of him. Investigators are running loose, searching. Naturally nobody is afraid of that because their consciences are clear, but it is unpleasant just the same. It is not the thing to do. The community is a force to be reckoned with. Is it right to go against the community? The community helps people in need or in misfortune. Your Nikolai will be sentenced anyway, because he is guilty. You have to live here among people. My advice to you is to think how people will look at you when your son is letting the community down."

Maria Ivanovna stared dully at the corner of the table.

Misha was surprised that in his presence Yerofeyev was so openly and cynically demanding Nikolai confess to something he was entirely innocent of. As though guessing Misha's thoughts, Yerofeyev added:

"Of course, it would be different if Nikolai was innocent. But if he is guilty he must confess. The law must not be cheated. And it is no use fooling the investigator. He is a busy man and must be told nothing but the truth. We must not deceive our Soviet government."

Misha winced at this hypocrisy. Of all people, Yerofeyev was the least expected to show such solicitude for Soviet rule.

"The Soviets gave us land," Yerofeyev continued. "There are rumours that this land may be taken away and given to a colony of delinquents, but I don't think the government will allow it. It will never leave the peasant

without land."

Misha felt he could no longer keep silent.

"Nobody is taking land away from the peasants," he said. "It will have to be returned only by people who unlawfully own hundreds of acres and exploit the peasants and labourers."

"We have no exploiters in our village, young man," Yerofeyev said in an oily tone of voice. "We're living as one community without kulaks and without beggars—everybody is equal." Yerofeyev got up and put on his cap. "My advice to you, Maria Ivanovna, is to think of what I've told you." He paused, then added, "Send your boy to me this evening. I'll find some flour for you. Now about Nikolai— think. Everybody in the village is asking you to do that."

Yerofeyev walked out. His boots and long coat flowed past the low windows, for a moment plunging the hut into darkness.

"Don't even so much as think of listening to him! Do you understand, Maria Ivanovna?" Misha said.

Maria Ivanovna made no reply.

"Can't you see through him?" Misha exclaimed. "He wants Nikolai to take the blame. He's afraid that Kuzmin's real murderer will be found. Don't even think of telling Nikolai all this. And don't take any flour from him."

"But we have to live," Maria Ivanovna said unhappily.

"Can't you manage without the kulak's help? We'll give you everything we can."

"I don't mean the flour," Maria Ivanovna said sadly. "I can't go against the community. Our home is here. Vasya," she pointed to Longshanks, "has got to be put on his feet."-

"Yerofeyev—the community?" Misha cried indignantly. "He doesn't represent the community. The kulaks have laid their hands on everything here. You're afraid of them. The government is supporting you and yet you're afraid of the kulaks. It's disgraceful! I'm warning you, Maria Ivanovna, if you try to persuade Nikolai to shoulder the blame I'll tell everybody that Yerofeyev made you do it. Please, don't forget that. As for you, Longshanks, don't you dare go to Yerofeyev. What a guardian angel he's making himself out to be! He wants you to sell your son for a measure of meal. Whatever you may think, Maria Ivanovna, but we'll not allow it. Not for anything!"

Chapter 42

THE CLUB

Afraid that Maria Ivanovna might after all send Longshanks to Yerofeyev for the flour, Misha took him along with him to the club.

Zina Kruglova was explaining the rules and customs of the Young Pioneers to the village children.

"A Young Pioneer is courageous, honest and truthful," she was saying.

"What does that mean? It means that a Young Pioneer is not afraid of anything or anybody, never lies, always tells the truth. That is what it means. Do you understand?"

The children were silent.

"Do you understand what I said?" Zina asked again.

"What about our parents? Mustn't we be afraid of them, too?" the Fly asked. "Of course."

"That's asking for a thrashing," the Fly said decisively.

"If you don't do anything that's bad why should you be afraid of them?"

"They won't stop to find out .if you're wrong or right," the Fly said.

"They'll give you a thrashing. Try and prove you were right after that!"

"Parents should not be feared but respected," Slava explained. "Now do you understand?"

Nobody replied.

"Has it penetrated?" Zina said, uncertainly.

"What about thunder or lightning, for instance?" Longshanks asked. "Tell me, we're not to be afraid of that? What if it kills you?"

"Cowardice and prudence are two different things," Zina said.

"Naturally, a person must be wary of lightning and take precautions. That is why we have lightning rods. But it's not something to walk in fear of. To be afraid of lightning will not save you."

"Do lightning rods help?" Longshanks asked with a smile.

"Of course."

"I say they don't."

"Why not?"

"Here's why! What is thunder? It is Elijah the prophet riding across the heavens in a chariot and driving demons before him. The demons hide from him in trees, in animals and even in human beings. Elijah shoots thunderbolts at them. If a demon hides in a tree, that tree will be struck by lightning. If he hides in a human being, lightning will strike that human being. To prevent a demon from hiding in you, you must pray. If you pray during a thunderstorm, you can be sure no demon will try to hide in you and nothing will happen to you. There is no other way of saving yourself."

That started a furious argument. The Komsomols argued that there was no Elijah the prophet and that in general there was no God. Longshanks and the Fly led the opposition. That was how it happened every time. Whatever they spoke about, they always brought the conversation round to God.

"Calm down," Misha said. "We're not talking about God, but about the rules and customs of the Young Pioneers. We'll talk about God some other time. Meanwhile, you have to understand the rules and customs. Otherwise how can you hope to become Young Pioneers?"

Just then Senka Yerofeyev and Akimka came in. Hearing Misha's last words, Senka said:

"Who wants to become a Young Pioneer?" He faced the children sitting on the benches and aggressively repeated, "Who? I'd like to see!"

Nobody moved. They were all afraid of Senka. Longshanks was the only one who was not in awe either of Senka or Akimka. Although he had no

intention of joining the Young Pioneers because he believed in God (a belief that was badly shaken after the expedition to the Goligin Brushwood Road), he said:

"Suppose I do? What's that to you?"

"You just try!" Senka muttered threateningly.



"We'll try. We're not going to ask your permission," said the Fly, emboldened by Longshanks' example.

Misha did not intervene. He wanted the children to give Senka a rebuff themselves. Let them feel their strength, let them understand that together they could defy Senka and Akimka. Otherwise, the detachment that was being organized in the village would fall apart in the winter. Senka and Akimka would see to that.

Senka shook his fist at Longshanks and the Fly.

"You'll be sorry!"

The youngsters felt they could not let that threat go by. Genka went up to Senka and stopped in front of him.

"What are you shaking your fists at us for? Go on, get out of here!"

"Hey, hey, careful!" Senka replied, but there was no longer a sting in his voice. "Who are you telling to get out? Think you own the place, or what? Is this club yours? I'll bash your teeth in!" He raised his fist.

"I'd like to see you do it!" Genka said, advancing on Senka. "Go on, try!"

The children jumped up from their seats. Senka looked wildly about him. Akimka edged towards the exit and halted on the threshold, ready to slip away at the first sign of danger.

"Well, what's stopping you?" Genka said, still advancing on Senka.

He was getting excited and was now spoiling for a fight. At last he would settle the score for the egg that was smashed on his head!

But Misha could not allow a fight in the club. He stepped between the two boys.

"You know what, Yerofeyev? If you don't like it here, go away and don't bother the others. And bear in mind that nobody is afraid of you. We are

many and you are one. You can't lick everybody."

Senka swept the hall with an angry glance, turned on his heel and strode to the door, followed by the merry laughter and jeers of the village children. The downfall of the omnipotent Yerofeyev was for them an unexpected and pleasant event.

At the door, Senka looked back and again shook his fist. That brought a fresh burst of laughter. The fist came down on Akimka's neck.

"What's that for?" Akimka asked plaintively.

"Next time you won't turn tail, that's your what for!"

Chapter 43

THE STRUGGLE FLARES UP

The day after Senka and Akimka had been chased out of the club so ignominiously, somebody cut down four apple-trees in the manor orchard. None of the troop had ever so much as seen these trees, but the chairman and two peasants took Misha to the orchard and showed him the damage.

"The handiwork of your boys?" the chairman demanded darkly.

"No," Misha replied firmly, "none of the boys could have done it."

"Then who did?"

"I don't know."

"There's nobody else who could have done it. Were there any strangers around here?"

"No."

"Exactly," the chairman said. "There neither were nor could be any strangers here. That means one of you chopped the trees down." "No," Misha replied heatedly. "None of us would do such a thing."

The chairman shook his head. "But the fact is that the trees have been chopped down."

Misha called an emergency meeting of the troop. He told them about the trees and sternly demanded to know who had cut them down. The only reply he got was a bewildered silence. Misha closely scrutinized the faces around him, but in none of them did he see so much as a shadow of guilt. He knew perfectly well that none of his troop was capable of such a dastardly act.

But why were they being accused?

The answer came a few days later.

The uyezds newspaper printed three short articles in succession that were respectively titled *Fine Club Organizers We Have, Stop Destroying Public Property* and *Is This How Elders Are Helped?* They were signed by a person calling himself *The Awl*.

The gist of the articles was that a Komsomol named Misha Polyakov went about his duties irresponsibly, allowed discipline to slacken among the Young Pioneers and turned them into a gang of hooligans. Instead of helping the Karagayevo peasants to fit out a club, Misha had taken up with a local drunkard, threw public money to the winds and spoilt the club. The

young people in his charge were cutting down trees in the estate which was the property of the people. Member of the Y.C.L. Misha Polyakov refused to help the local authorities, the example being the message for the chairman of the Borki Village Soviet. Moreover, he had suspicious connections with the family of a person charged with a crime.

That was a blow nobody expected. It virtually took the wind out of their sails. What humiliation to be reproached in public, in the press. It was all so unjust and untrue.

"We must send a denial," Slava said.

"Do you think the newspaper will print something against itself?" Zina Kruglova protested.

"We'll make them!" Genka shouted, rolling his eyes. "I'll go to the editorial office myself. Let them try not to print it!"

"You'll not scare anybody," Misha noted reasonably. "Besides, what are we going to deny? We can't deny that business about the club and about the message. The only thing that's not true is about the trees. Our denial will look flat. The club had to be repainted. We did not carry out the chairman's request. But we did not chop down the trees. After a denial like that people will laugh at us more than they're doing now."

But who was the man who signed himself *The Owl*? How could the editor allow things like that to be printed? Undoubtedly, he was a bad, ill-natured person. This formal disgracing of a whole collective and nullifying of their work without rhyme or reason was so unfair! Misha boiled with anger. Perhaps they ought to write a denial in spite of everything? Not to this but to a metropolitan newspaper. *Pravda* or *Izvestia*, for instance. After all, there *was* justice in the world.

Why had things like this never happened when Kolya Sevastyanov was in charge of the troop? There had never been any incidents. Everything had always been in order. While under him, Misha, things went wrong. Seva and Igor ran away from the camp, then a mess was made of the club. Perhaps he really was much too young to be the leader of the troop. But then what had he done that was wrong?

The youngsters trembled with shame. In the village they walked about with downcast eyes. They thought everybody had read the paper and was now censuring them. But the truth of the matter was that nobody censured them. Senka Yerofeyev alone maliciously declared :

"They made it hot for you in the papers! Wait, that's not the last of it."

What Senka threatened came to pass. A few days later, the chairman summoned Misha to the Village Soviet and handed him a paper from the Gubernia Department of Public Education, requesting the troop to quit the estate grounds forthwith "in view of systematic damage to the grounds." The paper was signed by Serov.

They were being driven out. What a disgrace!

But how could they go? To go meant admitting their guilt. What kind of memory would they leave behind in the village? How could they throw up everything? The Young Pioneer detachment that was about to be organized, the illiteracy-abolition class and the club, now that it had been repainted.

How could they drop all that? Because they had been slandered! The only reason for the slander was to drive them out of this neighbourhood. That meant they were in somebody's way. No, they would not surrender so easily! They would prove their innocence.

It was decided that Misha and Slava would go to town and try to get Serov's order waived. The more so that the "countess" had already gone there and would most certainly fling more mud at the troop. Genka was appointed to act as leader in Misha's absence.

"Look, Genka," Misha said to him, "until I return you're not to leave the camp under any pretext. No matter who orders you."

"Don't worry," Genka replied, "nobody will evict us." Then, with a theatrical gesture, he added, "Only over my dead body."

Chapter 44

THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES

The freight-and-passenger train crawled painfully along, stopping at every siding. From the window of the carriage the landscape was monotonously familiar: railway guards' huts, telegraph posts, flocks of sparrows on the wires, lowered turnpikes with the switchman holding up a rolled-up yellow flag, the village on the hill-side, the pond with an embankment and ducks swimming in it, a bearded man with a small shining milk-can in his hand standing on the station platform, workers with crowbars and spades repairing the track, an old woman with a small flower-patterned bundle walking slowly along a path, vacationers on bicycles.

However, Misha and Slava could not enjoy the landscape: they were stealing a ride.

Misha knew of quite a few ways of travelling in this fashion. The simplest was to find a seat in the middle of the carriage and, as soon as the inspector appeared, to dart over to the opposite side and merge with the merry throng of other stowaways.

Of late, the inspectors had caught on to that trick and now entered the carriage in pairs, one from each end. That was why this time Misha chose the most difficult method. While the train was in motion, he stood on the steps, but the moment it pulled into a siding he hopped down, waited until he saw what carriage the inspectors boarded and acted accordingly. At first, he made his way from one end of the train to the other, then he got off at the first stop, ran to the carriage where the inspectors had checked the tickets and calmly sat down. He had become so adept at this that he could tell exactly when the inspectors would appear in one carriage or another.

In this fashion, he and Slava reached the town. Slava was not a coward, but he was touchy and timid. It seemed to him that everybody was aware that he was a stowaway and that feeling made him ashamed. Misha was also ashamed. But, as was always the case when there were difficulties, he gave theoretical grounds for what he did.

"Of course, it isn't right to steal rides," he said, "but stowaways are phenomena of the period of rehabilitation. When our country will be rich nobody will ride trains without tickets."

"If people were to reason like that, nobody would buy tickets. You mustn't forget that the railways are supposed to be self-supporting," Slava protested.

Discussing this problem, the boys manoeuvred, changing from one carriage to another, because this time there were many inspectors on the line. They kept changing carriages until one circumstance drew their attention.

They saw the "countess."

The carriage was crowded. The only place where people were lying was on the luggage rack. On the upper berths they were sitting with their feet dangling before the noses of the people sitting below them. It was hot and stuffy. The "countess," pressed into a corner, was dozing. She was sitting by an open window and the black coal-dust was settling on her face.

The boys knew that the "countess" was also going to town, and because of that they did not attach any importance to the fact that she was in the same train. But in another carriage they saw the boatman.

Why were the two of them going to town? And in different carriages?

"It's possible that this is simply a coincidence," Slava suggested.

Misha shook his head.

"I don't think so," he said. "We'll watch them and see if they're going there separately or together."

When the train came to a stop in the town, the passengers filled the wet platform. There had just been a short summer rain and the raindrops were glistening on the railings, the rubbish cans, on the station girders.

"I'll shadow the boatman," Misha whispered, "and you follow the 'countess.' Only keep your eyes peeled."

Without losing sight of the "countess" and the boatman, the boys slowly made their way through the crowd. The "countess" and the boatman walked separately: she in front and he following at a considerable distance. The boys had a good view of him, but the "countess" kept appearing and disappearing in the crowd.

For a short time the square in front of the station teemed with the stream of people from the train. The cabbies, sitting in their tall, clumsy cabs, called out for passengers. Whenever one of the cabs moved off along the cobbled road, its black, folding, harmonica-like back bobbed up and down. Water-sellers rushed about with big bottles of tap-water coloured with cheap syrup. There were hawkers with trays on their chests. Waifs, "the last of the Mohicans," lay in the shade of the station, apparently dreaming but actually keenly watching for an opportunity to snatch a piece of luggage.

The "countess" disappeared, but the boys kept the boatman in sight. He turned into one of the streets and the boys went after him, keeping at a respectful distance. Soon they again caught sight of the "countess."

It did not take them long to see that the boatman was sticking doggedly to the "countess." He did not try to get near her, but kept close to the walls

of buildings and very ingeniously hid behind the pedestrians in front of him. When the "countess" stopped at a street corner to let a cart train pass, the boatman also stopped, hiding behind the porch of a house and making believe he was rolling a cigarette. The boys barely managed to conceal themselves behind a newspaper kiosk.

Thus they progressed—the boatman behind the "countess" and the boys behind the boatman—until they reached the street where stood the Museum of Regional Studies, which Misha had visited in company with Genka and Boris Sergeyevich.

It was a quiet, little-frequented street. From behind a corner, the boys saw the "countess" entering the museum and the boatman lurking behind a projecting wall and watching her. Then the boatman crossed the street and lay down on a lawn in the shade of a tree.

For some time, the boys stood in their hiding-place. Then they went to a side-street, where they conferred on what to do next.

"Who knows how long the 'countess' will be in the museum," said the sober-minded Slava. "She might be there all day. Then why stay here? We've got more important things to do."

But Misha did not agree. He was not prepared to let a chance like this slip through his fingers. It would have been a different matter if the "countess" had come here alone. In that case, the explanation would have been that she had come to take a look at the manor-house furnishings. But why was the boatman, her faithful servant and accomplice, following her? There was something, something very important in this.

"I'll go and see Serov alone," Misha said, "and you stay here and try and find out why the countess came to the museum and why the boatman is shadowing her."

"But..." Slava tried to protest.

"No buts," Misha said. "Find out everything. And wait for me here. I'll be back soon."

Chapter 45

AT SEROV'S AGAIN

Once again Misha found himself in front of the grey building-housing the Gubernia Department of Public Education. There was a troubled look in his eyes as he gazed at it. How would Serov receive him? He wished Boris Sergeyevich, the headmaster of the children's home, were here. He would support them. He would never allow the troop to be sent away. Well, never mind, if nothing came of this visit, he, Misha, would go.... Where would he go? To the Gubernia Komsomol Committee, of course. If they refused to help him, he would go to the Gubernia Party Committee. That was where he would go!

Serov received Misha as an old friend. He waved his hands and shook his head sadly, saying:

"I know, I know. I know all about your bad break. I managed to hush things up. It could have been worse."

Misha was dumbfounded.

"What things?"

"A terrific row was raised about you here," Serov said, shaking his head and gesticulating. "They wanted to report to Moscow. But I told them, 'It happens. The lads are young and inexperienced and so could not get on with the local population. Are you going to hang them for that? They will go somewhere else and that will be the end of it.' "

"But why should we go somewhere else?"

A note of gentle and friendly persuasion crept into Serov's voice:

"Is it so hard to take your tents to another place? Think for yourself.... What difference does it make where your camp is? You'll only rid yourself of trouble."

"It isn't hard to move the tents," Misha said, "but why must we go away at all? It's not fair."

Serov threw up his hands in disappointment.

"This won't do at all.... Have you read the papers ?"

"There's no truth in those articles," Misha replied.

Serov sadly screwed up his eyes and said in a grieved tone of voice:

"How can you say such a thing? You are a Komsomol and this is your attitude to our Soviet press!"

"Not to the press but to the person who wrote the articles," Misha replied, knitting his brows.

Unexpectedly, a note of sternness crept into Serov's voice:

"The editorial office," he said, "does not print anything without checking the facts. And you must remember, the newspaper is headed by Communists, by your senior comrades. I'll have you respect them, if you please."

The argument was forcible, especially so far as Misha was concerned. But for all that he could not back down.

"It's all wrong and unfair," he persisted. "We'll see what the Gubernia Komsomol Committee has to say about it."

For an instant Serov shut his eyes. In that moment, the lowered eyelids, swollen and unnaturally big for such small eyes, made his face look like a thick, immobile mask. When he opened his eyes, they no longer darted from object to object, but were fixed coldly on Misha.

"So you are intending to complain?"

"Not to complain, but to report the matter."

"Hm.... And do you know how it will end for you?"

"How?"

"You'll be expelled from the Y.C.L."

"What for?" Misha asked in surprise.

"For the trouble you have brought people," Serov said roughly. "At first I wanted to put the matter before the Gubernia Komsomol Committee, but I was sorry for you. This is my advice to you: take your tents and go away. Without noise. The Y.C.L. will not pat you on the back for what you've

done. So see that there is no row. Don't start any trouble."

"I am a member of the Y.C.L.," Misha replied proudly, "and I will never shirk my responsibility. I am always ready to answer for what I do."

"The culprits who cut down the apple-trees must be punished," Serov threatened, "and they will be punished. And you'll be made to pay not only for the apple-trees, but also for the paints and materials spoilt at the club. I can imagine how pleasant that is going to be for you when your school and Komsomol Committee will get to hear about it. Therefore, I repeat, your best recourse is to leave without noise or scandal. To slip away in time. Understand?"

Serov added that Igor and Seva's escapade was another point against him. He was a bad leader if his Young Pioneers were running away! Running away, getting mixed up in murders, and stealing boats. It was still not very clear if they had simply stolen the boat or if there was something graver behind it. Yes, yes, he had the impression that the matter was not as simple as some people were trying to make it out to be. He had learned a thing or two while Igor and Seva stayed at his house. That was how all this was turning out, young man. It was a pretty piece of business all round. You must think of your future. Your life is only beginning and you cannot afford to have any slurs cast on your character. The best thing for you is to go away while the going is good.

Misha listened with bowed head. Serov's interpretation of everything made it look as though the boys had committed a heinous crime. How had it happened? No doubt, people would believe Serov. Then there were those articles. What a blemish that would make on the troop!

"Have we come to an understanding?" Serov asked, looking closely at Misha.

In his voice Misha caught a note of anxiety.

"I'll think about it."

"Very well," Serov said with satisfaction, putting both his hands, palms down, on his desk. "Our gubernia is big, there's room everywhere. It'll do you good to travel about, to get to know more about the region where you were born. You'll return to your camp today, and early tomorrow morning you'll pack up and...."

Misha walked out of Serov's office. Contradictory feelings took possession of him. What was he to do?

Serov was a scoundrel. That much was clear. He had no friendly feelings for Misha and he wanted the troop to leave Karagayevo. People would listen to him rather than to Misha. Even Boris Sergeyevich, the headmaster of the children's home, was powerless against Serov and could not take over the estate. Serov could very easily prove to the Gubernia Committee of the Komsomol that Misha and his friends were in the wrong in everything. He was the type who would cunningly take advantage of their mistakes, both real and imaginary. And it could all end in the troop finding themselves in really hot water.

What could he do to avoid trouble? Return to the camp, pack up and move away from the estate? Throw up everything? The club, the village

children, the illiteracy-abolition class, where people could already read by syllables? To leave Nikolai Ribalin, Long-shanks and his mother to their fate? To do nothing to help Boris Sergeyevich organise his labour commune? In general, to run away from the fight, to admit he was wrong? To run like a coward from the tribunal of his comrades?

No! That was not the way of Komsomols! He could not surrender! Whatever happened, they were not guilty of any crime. They had blundered, but they were honest Komsomols and were not afraid to answer for what they did.... Was it possible that the people at the Gubernia Komsomol Committee would not be able to sort things out?

Chapter 46

VICTORY!

Misha found the secretary of the Gubernia Committee coming down the stairs. He was a fair-headed lad in a leather jerkin, bell-bottomed trousers and a grey cap.

"What do you want?" he demanded when Misha stopped him.

Walking at his side, Misha started telling him why he had come. But people kept claiming the secretary's attention, once or twice he stopped and called to someone himself, and in the end said that he had understood nothing.

"I haven't the faintest notion of what you're talking about. Here, let's sit down and you tell me everything from the beginning."

They sat down on a window-sill. Misha began his story all over again. This time the secretary understood and said:

"They'll solve this murder without your help. They've already found the track. About the manor-house, the museum, the bird— all that is fantasy, romance." He made a scornful gesture with his hand. "You've been reading too many adventure stories. You young people like secrets, adventures and things of that sort. But you don't get all that in real life. What you tell me boils down to this: there's an old estate, its former owners are holding on to it and are refusing to turn it into a children's home, while Serov imagines he is a connoisseur of antiquities and is objectively helping the former landlords. I happen to be informed about it. The director of a children's home in Moscow has been here to see me. We promised to help him and are going to keep our promise. They'll get the estate. But that mystery of yours and everything else—that's all bosh! As regards your troop, Serov is taking too much upon himself. Imagines he can throw his weight about! If your troop does anything, you, as the leader, will be held responsible. Not by Serov, but by the Komsomol. That is how the issue stands. Now tell me yourself what useful work you have done and what mistakes, in your opinion, you have made."

Misha listed all that his troop had done in the village. He mentioned the incident with Igor and Seva as one of the shortcomings, but quickly added

that it could have happened in any troop and that Igor and Seva were sorry for what they did.

Another mistake, Misha said, was that they let the artist paint the club, but they had repainted it themselves. It was true that they had not passed on the Village 'Soviet chairman's message, but that had never happened before and the troop did and was doing all it could to help the Village Soviet. And they knew nothing about who chopped down the apple-trees.

"Are you sure?" The secretary gave Misha a keen glance.

"Yes," Misha said in a hurt tone of voice. "I've got no reason to lie. Serov advised me not to come here and said I should take the troop and go away. But I came here myself, nobody forced me.

"All right," the secretary said, rising. "You're a good lad, I can see that, and I believe you. Don't move your troop anywhere. Got that? And continue with your work in the village. But you must tighten up on your chaps. You must have discipline."

"What if Serov again tells us to get out?" Misha asked.

"Let him talk until he's blue in the face," the secretary answered in a carefree tone, "you're not taking orders from him. He's got to stop his stupid bungling. In case anything happens, you tell him that you've got orders from me. About those articles—we'll look into the matter. Got it? Ail right then, scat! I've got a mountain of work as it is."

"Tough chap," thought Misha as he left the Gubernia Committee. "Good thing I went to see him. I deserve to be kicked in the pants for almost letting Serov frighten me. If I had listened to him I would never have forgiven myself...."

The secretary fellow had taken a load off Misha's mind.

He would, of course, have to tighten up on discipline, take the troop in hand and put an end to slackness, silly games like "flowers," and Genka's tricks. But the troop was not going anywhere and would finish the work it had started.

He couldn't have managed it better!

He strode along the street with chest proudly stuck out. The troop would now prove its worth. Since they were staying, they would do all the things they had planned.

It would be a good idea to look in at the investigator's and find out about Nikolai.... But that could be put off for the troop was waiting anxiously for news and he had to hurry back to calm them.



Let everybody in the village find out that they were not leaving the manor grounds. And let the chairman find out. For by now everybody was probably thinking they were a gang of criminals.

Chapter 41

IN THE MUSEUM AGAIN

Slava was waiting where Misha had left him. "Well, what?" he asked.

"It's all settled," Misha replied. "Serov, of course, would not hear of it. Tried to persuade me to move the camp somewhere else. But I refused to budge. I went to the Gubernia Committee of the Komsomol and spoke to the secretary. He told me we could stay and that nobody has any authority to throw us out."

"Just like that, without checking?"

"What is there to check? He's no bureaucrat. I told him everything. He knows Serov well and has his number. To make a long story short, we're staying. What news have you got? Did you see the 'countess'?"

Slava looked about him and mysteriously opened wide his eyes.

"I went into the museum, to the *Life of the Gentry* room, the one you spoke about...." "What about the boatman?"

"He left and I took advantage of that.... There I was in -the room and saw the 'countess' coming. I pretended I was interested in some old costumes. There was nobody else in the museum. She went past me slowly and though I was standing with my side to her, almost my back, I saw her looking at me suspiciously. I did not move. She went by and then, evidently going round the museum, reappeared in the same corridor. I went over to another showcase. She gave me another impatient and suspicious look and passed into the next room. I saw I was in her way. So I hid behind a curtain. It was a

little frightening and terribly dusty...."

"I can understand the dusty part of it, but why was it frightening?"

"What if she suddenly decided to see if anybody was behind the curtain?"

"Were you afraid she'd eat you?"

"No, but I'd feel awkward. Besides, I was afraid I'd sneeze: it was very dusty and when you're afraid you'll sneeze you can bet you will sneeze.... Well, then, there I was behind the curtain and I could see everything through a hole. The old woman came back, saw there was nobody there and remained. At first she made believe she was looking at the show-cases, but after a time she went up to the rope—you know the one that's around the furniture."

"Yes, yes...."

"She lifted the rope and went up to the bronze bird. I could not see what she did there because she had her back to me and was blocking the bird. She stayed there for about a minute. To me it seemed hours, but actually it was not more than a minute. Then she replaced the rope and went away."

"It's clear to me now," Misha said decisively, "that there's a hiding-place in the bronze bird. I'm quite certain of it."

"And you know," Slava continued, "there's a drawing showing the genealogy of the counts. It shows that they were related to the Demidovs."

"That isn't important now," Misha said. "We're not worrying about the Demidovs. The hiding-place is the chief thing now. Come on!"

"Where to?"

"The museum. We'll take another look at the bronze bird."

The boys went into the museum and slowly, casually, so as not to arouse the suspicions of the attendant, passed through the suite of rooms. When there's some mystery in the air, you always imagine that everybody is watching you. That was how it was with Misha. To him it seemed that the attendant sat down on a stool near the entrance with the express purpose of watching him and Slava.

Waiting for him to go away, the boys gazed at the exhibits. The attendant, who was also the watchman, dozed on his stool. He nodded drowsily and shook his head erect at regular intervals.

At last, he shook himself awake, looked round with sleepy eyes, rose to his feet and dragged himself off.

Slava stayed in the corridor to act as look-out, while Misha went up to the rope, resolutely lifted it... when suddenly Slava signalled a warning. Misha quickly lowered the rope, turned to the wall, pretending to look at the pictures showing the life of the 18th-century gentry.

Two girls, who looked like students, in glasses and with bobbed hair, came into the room. Glancing at the exhibits hanging on the walls, they made notes and paid no attention at all to the two boys. Misha and Slava had to wait until they went into the corridor and turned round the corner. When they disappeared, Misha returned to the rope, but the attendant came into view. His huge, torn felt boots shuffled along the floor, and with a rag he wiped the dust off everything that he saw in front of him. But as he kept

to the corridor, without going into any of the rooms, there was little that required his attention. The boys again pretended they were looking at the exhibits. For the sake of conspiracy, Misha began to tell Slava about the peasant reform of 1861. He had had the subject for his homework in the spring and had forgotten most of what he had known about it. As a result, what he said was just a string of words like allotment, redemption, Stolypin, pre-Reform Russia, post-Reform Russia, compensation, homestead, community, exploitation.... He pronounced these words so loudly that the attendant told him to lower his voice.

Finally, the attendant hobbled his way round a corner. Slava took up his post. Misha lifted the rope, went to the bronze bird and began to feel for the hiding-place. But there was no sign of it. Then, carefully, he began to touch the bird's head, wings, neck and legs, trying to find if any of these parts could be screwed off or opened. But nothing opened and nothing could be screwed off. Misha twisted, pulled, pressed, but nothing happened. Then he tried to lift the bird—perhaps the hiding-place was in the pedestal. But the bird was fixed securely to the pedestal.

A bell rang. It was closing time.

Misha feverishly pulled the bird, but without result.

Slava again made a warning sign. Misha barely managed to jump clear of the rope. The girls....

When they passed by, Misha again lifted the rope, but another warning signal came from Slava. There was really no need for the signal because Misha heard the shuffling footfalls of the attendant.

"We're closing," he said and stood waiting for the boys to go.

There was nothing they could do but go out.

Groaning and sighing, the attendant closed the door behind them.

Chapter 48

THE BOATMAN AGAIN

It was already dark when the boys left the museum. It had certainly been a full day for them. And they had accomplished a lot. First, they had saved the camp. Second, they found that the boatman was spying on the "countess." Then they had discovered that the old woman was using the bronze bird in the museum as a hiding-place. They had not found the hiding-place, but that was now only a question of time. Another trial or two and they would find it.

True, they had missed their train. Now they had to wait for the morning train, but that was no trouble at all, for it was summer and they could find a bed beneath any shrub.

Animatedly discussing the events of the day, they walked to the end of the street and stopped. Misha proposed going to the town park and spending the night on one of the benches.

"I don't like the idea," Slava said, "after all, we're not tramps."

"What do you suggest?"

"That we sleep in the railway station."

"First, it's dirty there; second, they won't let us in. If you don't want to go to the park, we can go to the cathedral. There's a little garden near it and we can sleep there."

"All right," Slava agreed.

Just as the boys turned to go, they saw the boatman standing before them.

"Ho!" he said, smiling his hateful smile. "Greetings to old friends!"

"How do you do," replied Slava, polite even to the man whom only a few days ago he had thrown out of a boat.

Misha was silent, glancing sullenly at the boatman.

"Been taking the day off?" the boatman asked, still smiling.

"What business is it of yours?" Misha snapped at him.

The boatman shook his head disapprovingly.

"Ai-ai-ai.... Why so rude? I meet fellow villagers, you might say, and the least I can do is to come up and say hello. Or are you nursing a grudge against me?"

"We've got no grudge," Misha muttered.

"I thought you had. Glad I'm wrong. No reason why you should bear a grudge against me. You gave me a bath in the river, but, you see, I've got no hard feelings."

He laughed, but there was no mirth about his laugh. His eyes regarded the boys watchfully.

"Going back to the camp?"

"Yes."

"But the last train has gone."

"There's an additional, night train," Misha lied. "Is that so?" the boatman said with mock surprise. "I didn't know. I thought I'd have to spend the night in town. Fine! That means I'll go home."

Together with Misha and Slava he strode off towards the railway station.

The boys had no idea how they were going to shake him off. But the railway station was the only place they could go to. There was no night train. Even if there were, they would never have gone together with the boatman, for that would have meant going with him from the siding to the camp through the woods at night. He'd put a knife through you before you'd realise what was happening....



The only people in the dimly-lit station were a few passengers, who were dozing on the wooden high-backed benches, clutching their bundles, bags and suitcases.

"It looks as though there's no train after all," the boatman said, grinning faintly to show that he had not been fooled: he had known all the time that there was no train.

"Looks like it," Misha said imperturbably, sitting down on a bench.

Slava sat down beside him.

"We must think of something," the boatman said with affected anxiety. "I'll tell you what: I have some friends living nearby. They'll be pleased to let us stay overnight."

"We're quite comfortable where we are," Misha replied firmly.

The boatman made an effort to persuade them, now promising a good dinner and a soft bed, now warning them that the station would anyway be closed at midnight and they would have to sleep in the street. But the boys flatly refused the boatman's offers and it was clear that they would not go anywhere.

The boatman showed no intention of leaving the station without them.

The clock struck nine, then ten, eleven. Dmitry Petrovich tried to question them about their troop and camp, but the boys, resting against the wooden back of the bench, dozed or pretended to be dozing.

Now and then an express or a freight train rumbled through the station. Red and green lights flicked past the great windows and the white lights of hand-lanterns could be seen swaying. They heard the sharp whistles of the guards and the answering, drawn-out whistles of the engines. At twelve o'clock, a station attendant in an ill-fitting black coat went round the hall, shaking the sleeping passengers awake and telling them to leave the hall. But nobody rose from his seat. The militiaman on duty in the hall turned away with an air as though this was no concern of his.



A few weary hours passed. Through their drowsiness, the boys felt the vigilant gaze of the boatman. Whatever he was doing at the moment, sitting on a bench, pacing up and down the hall, or going out into the square or to the platform, the boys knew that he never let them out of his sight for a minute.

It was growing light outside, though the hour was not yet four. They saw people on the platform—greasers, weighers....

The station gradually filled with passengers. The train which Misha and Slava had wanted to take was due to leave at six o'clock. But they changed their minds about taking it, preferring to stay longer in town rather than go with the boatman. There would be another train an hour later and they would go on it.

The hour hand drew near to six. The boatman grew more and more restive. Hidden by the tall, straight back of the bench, he watched the entrance, sometimes getting up and looking at the station square from a window.

"He's waiting for the countess," Slava said quietly.

"I think so too," Misha nodded.

The "countess" came into the station, crossed the hall and went out to the platform. The boatman followed her without her noticing it. Probably to see what carriage she would get in.

Soon he returned.

"Come on, lads!" he said. "Have you got return tickets?"

"We don't need them," Misha replied.

"Stowaways," the boatman laughed.

The first bell rang.

"We're not going. We have business here," Slava said.

The boatman frowned and looked at the boys distrustfully.

"You're not going? Why?"

"We're not going, that's all," Misha said. "And in general, why do you want to know? Why are you bothering us? You have to go— well, go!"

The boatman stood in front of them, frowning.
The second bell went.
"As you like," he said and turning on his heel went out to the platform.

Chapter 49

SEVA PROPITIOUSLY FALLS ILL

The troop was jubilant. The attempt to evict them had failed. Misha's prestige soared.... It was generally felt that he had done something heroic: he had been to town, talked to people in various places.... And the people he had spoken to had treated him as a real, adult leader.

Misha grew in stature in his own eyes as well. He adopted a good-natured patronizing attitude towards the troop. Copying Kolya Sevastyanov, he spoke with them with the tolerant smile an adult reserves for the pranks of children. He stopped arguing and losing his temper, and patiently explained things as adults do when they deal with children. At the same time, he would put a patronizing arm round the shoulder of the boy or girl he was talking to at the moment, just as he had seen Kolya Sevastyanov do hundreds of times. True, Kolya did that because he was very tall, but not so in Misha's case, though he did think he was not doing it so badly.

That was not how everybody looked at it.

Zina Kruglova called Genka and Slava aside to the woods and said with alarm:

"Look, chaps, have you noticed that there's something wrong with Misha?"

Genka and Slava hung their heads: they had noticed it before Zina.

"He's giving himself airs, making out he's a big noise," Genka said.

"He's showing signs of high-handedness," Slava added.

"But that might tear him away from the collective," Zina said, hurriedly.

"Very easily, too," Genka agreed.

"High-handedness," Slava said solemnly, "always isolates a person."

"We must do something," Zina said anxiously. "We cannot allow him to be lost to the common cause before our eyes. We must save him."

There was a pause. Of course, he had to be saved, but how?

"Perhaps we ought to talk to him?" Slava suggested. "Perhaps we ought to explain to him where all this is taking him."

Genka shook his head:

"He won't listen. He'll tell you that that's his style of leadership. No! Stronger methods are needed. We've got to hit him hard enough to wake him up. Then it'll work."

"What do you propose?"

"I propose we raise the question at our Komsomol meeting."

"Just like that? Let's speak to him first. If he doesn't change, we'll take him to task at our meeting."

That was what they finally decided to do. Misha knew nothing about

their decision and continued to behave as before.

With adults he comported himself staidly, with a consciousness of his own dignity. True, the chairman of the Village Soviet and the other villagers did not know of his conversation with the secretary of the Gubernia Committee of the Y.C.L., but the fact that Misha did not obey Serov's order and Serov did not insist he do so showed that the troop had strong backing and that it was no simple thing to evict it.

In the troop itself, things had never run as smoothly as now. Almost nothing untoward happened. The only cloud was that Seva fell gravely ill.

His head ached, there was a tickling sensation in his throat, he had difficulty swallowing his food and even found breathing difficult. His fever rose to 103.8°F.

The Bleater, who was the troop's medical expert (his mother was charwoman at an out-patient hospital), ordered Seva to open his mouth, looked into it and announced that he had a sore throat.

"It's all red and, in general, everything's swollen," he said. "Have you had your tonsils out?"

Seva shook his head.

"Perhaps you had them out when you were little and you don't remember?"

But Seva was quite categorical in his denial.

The Bleater again looked into Seva's mouth and declared that indeed his tonsils were still there and that they were badly swollen and should be removed.

"In medicine," the Bleater said, "there are two points of view. One is that tonsils should be removed by a surgical operation, and the other—that they should be cauterised. I'm in favour of the first."

Seva was covered with a few blankets and given hot tea with an extra sweet. Then they began to think what to do with him.

He was too ill to stand the journey to Moscow and could not walk to the hospital. The chairman was sure to refuse to let them have a horse. Misha decided to send the doctor a note requesting him to come to the camp. After all, he did visit patients who were seriously ill. And the hospital had its own horse.

The doctor arrived in a small, open four-wheeled carriage drawn by a huge horse, a real Moscow bityug. (*A Russian breed of cart-horse.—Tr.*) Tall, stout, with tousled beard, his pince-nez caught over the ear with a black thread, the doctor looked funny sitting on top of his carriage. It seemed as though he were moving behind the enormous bityug with only the reins to hold on to and that he had the tiny carriage squeezed between his legs.

He said that Seva had quinsy (the Bleater looked about him proudly). His tonsils had to be removed (the Bleater fairly swelled with pride). But, he added, no operation could be performed until Seva got well. He had to take medicine and it was necessary to move him from the tent to a house.

"What house?" Misha said, taken by surprise. "He lives in Moscow."

"Do you mean to tell me that none of the peasants will take him in for a few days?" the doctor said. "As a matter of fact.... What about the manor? I

understand it's vacant."

"Do you think she'll allow it?" Misha asked.

"Who do you mean?"

"The mistress, the housekeeper."

"Hm...." The doctor frowned. "Come with me."

When they turned into the drive, Misha glanced at the loft. The shutters behind the bronze bird were open and that meant the "countess" was at home. But the rest of the house was empty.

By the way the doctor confidently strode along the walk and resolutely climbed the steps to the verandah, it was obvious that he was familiar with the house and the grounds. But Misha was sure nothing would come of this enterprise. The old woman would produce the safeguard and that would put an end to it. Misha awaited the meeting with the "countess" with curiosity. He did not believe they would open the door of this mysterious house and enter it.

No sooner had they reached the verandah than the door opened and the old woman appeared. She awaited their approach in her usual pose, her eyes shut and her head held high, and that made her long aquiline nose seem longer than it really was.

When she opened her eyes Misha knew she would say, "What can I do for you?"

The "countess" did indeed open her mouth and say, "What...." But that same instant she glanced at the doctor and a look of embarrassment appeared on her face. For a fleeting instant her eyes betrayed her confusion. Without ending the phrase, she shut her eyes again. For a moment or two nobody spoke, then the doctor said:

"Sofya Pavlovna, one of these young travellers has fallen ill. Sore throat. I can't allow him to lie in a tent. Please let him in for three or four days."

"What about the hospital?" the old woman asked after a pause, without opening her eyes.

"It is closed for repairs."

"Who will look after him?"

Misha was amazed to hear her speak like any other human being and that she was called simply Sofya Pavlovna.

"One of them," the doctor said, nodding in Misha's direction. "I shall call regularly."

For some time, the old woman made no reply, then she closed her eyes and said:

"You consider it possible to come to this house?"

"I am doing my duty," the doctor replied calmly.

"All right," the old woman said after a short silence. "When will the boy be brought?"

"At once."

"I'll prepare a place for him in the servants' hall. Nobody is to go beyond the servants' hall."

"That's for you to say," the doctor replied.

The old woman turned and disappeared into the house.

Chapter 50

THE SERVANTS' HALL

When Seva was brought to the manor on a stretcher, the door of the servants' hall was open. That was tantamount to permission to enter. The youngsters went in.

The servants' hall was a big room with a low ceiling. It was enough to stand on one's toes to reach the ceiling, which consisted of old, time-blackened logs evenly, squared and full of lengthwise cracks. The walls were made of similar logs with the grooves between them filled with tow.

Everything in it was old, blackened by smoke. The table, long, narrow and resting on wobbly trestles, stretched along one of the walls. Its top, made of thin, narrow boards, had cracked. Behind the table was a narrow bench fixed to the wall. With the exception of a pole that hung beneath the ceiling with either end touching a wall, there was nothing else in the room. None of the youngsters could explain what the pole was there for.

A low, broad door, with the paint peeling off, connected the servants' hall with the rest of the house. When Misha touched it, he found that it was held in place by nails that lay insecurely in their sockets. A good push was enough to make it fly open.

The youngsters started tidying up the "hospital," as the Bleater named the hall. They swept out the rubbish, and washed the floor and the windows. Then they made a bed of fir branches on the bench and laid Seva on it.

To prevent any collision with the old woman, Misha put the manor grounds out of bounds except for whoever was detailed to look after Seva. But he went there a few times, telling himself that after all he was the person responsible for Seva.... Besides, he was interested in the house. Each time he went to the "hospital" he stood at the door and listened. There was a deathly stillness behind it. Once or twice he thought he could hear somebody on the other side listening to what was going on in the servants' hall. He could not tell why that thought came to him. Perhaps it was because the silence behind the door was much too tense and the house itself was much too mysterious. When Misha tried the door to see how firmly it held, the thought that somebody was behind it listening came to him again. He left the door in peace.

On the next day, the old woman took the train to town, no doubt to complain to Serov again. Unquestionably, Serov would make an attempt to force the troop to move Seva from the house. Misha did not want to do that just yet. By being in the manor there was the possibility that he would learn something. They had to stay there at all costs. Naturally, it would be a good thing if Seva got well quickly, but if he did they would chase them out. Each time Misha asked Seva how he felt, he wanted to hear something reassuring about his health and at the same time something that would mean that Seva would have to stay in the house a while longer.

But in the morning, Seva said he felt better, and towards evening declared he was bored with having to lie in the house and would get up in the morning.

"You just try," Misha threatened him. "You'll get up when the doctor says you can. He won't allow it soon—after a sore throat you have to stay in bed for a few days or there may be complications."

With similar anxiety Misha looked at the thermometer. How quickly fever falls! It was 103.8 yesterday, but now it was 98. Happily, in the evening Seva's temperature rose to 98.8

"You see how your temperature jumps," he said to Seva. "That's the most dangerous part of it. Aren't I right, Bleater?"

The Bleater was very happy to be in charge of the hospital and he quickly agreed that an unstable temperature was very dangerous. Seva had to stay in bed if he wanted to get well!

But sooner or later Seva would recover. And it would be sooner rather than later. Then they would have to leave the servants' hall. How could that be averted?

While Misha was pondering over this problem, the old woman returned. She returned in Misha's absence, went to the servants' hall, stopped in the doorway and demanded:

"How soon will your patient get well?"

The Nekrasova sisters were on duty at Seva's bedside. The woman's tone frightened them and they answered quickly:

"He's feeling much better. He'll be up tomorrow."

The "countess" walked away.

When Misha arrived and the matter was reported to him, he was terribly put out.

"Who told you to say that?" he cried angrily. "How do you know that Seva will be up tomorrow? What if he isn't well by then? What if he's still ill when the countess will tell us to take him away? That's what you did with your brainless chatter!"

"We lost our heads," the girls said, trying to justify themselves. "We were afraid she would tell us to get out there and then."

"I'm going to town tomorrow," Misha said, "and until I come back Seva is to remain in this house. Even if the doctor says he's well. Is that clear?"

Chapter 51

NIGHT IN THE MUSEUM

Misha went to the town to make another try at finding the secret of the bronze bird. It was impossible to do that in the daytime, for the attendant was on duty and there were visitors, but at night it was different. His plan was that he and Genka would conceal themselves behind a curtain, wait until the museum would be closed and then examine the bronze bird without interruption.

The boys entered the museum an hour before closing time. They now knew their way about and that there were two exits—one into the street and the other into the yard. The attendant's routine was first to shut the front door and then to go round to the yard and shut the back door. The boys decided to stay in the museum all night and in the morning to hide behind the curtain again, wait for the attendant to come and open the museum, and then to slip out into the street or to pretend they had just come.

Everything went off according to plan. The museum was empty. Before hiding behind a curtain, Misha and Genka waited until the attendant went into one of the rooms. Only then did Misha realize how difficult it had been for Slava: there was so much dust that it was hardly possible to breathe. He was afraid that Genka would not be able to stand it and would sneeze. But Genka staunchly held out and did not sneeze.

The shuffling footfalls of the attendant drew near. :

The boys held their breath. The steps stopped at the curtain, Misha and Genka stood stock-still.

The attendant broke out into a fit of coughing. The boys could not see what he did in the room.... Then he shuffled off again, the sounds of his footsteps growing fainter and fainter. A metallic ring came from the direction of the front door—it was the watchman securing a heavy metal hook. That was followed by a thud—it was the wooden bolt. And finally came the creak of the lock. The door was closed!

Again the boys heard the shuffling footsteps. At first they drew nearer and then began to recede. Misha drew the curtain aside and listened. A door was banged shut. Then he heard the grating of a key in a lock. That was all! The boys had the museum to themselves!

After waiting a few minutes longer, they took off their boots, went barefoot to the back door and carefully tried it—it was locked. They went through all the rooms. The evening light struggled through the folds of the curtains. The pictures on the walls looked mysteriously dark, the glass cases on the tables shone in the semi-darkness. The stuffed animals and birds cut weird figures.

The boys returned to the *Life of the Gentry* department. Genka stayed in the corridor to be able to warn Misha of danger.

Misha took the rope down and carefully, without haste, examined the bronze bird.

First, he slowly ran his fingers over it, trying to find a slit or a hole: perhaps it was opened with a key? But there was no opening. Then he tried to turn separate parts of the bird: the head, the crest, one wing, then the other, one leg, then the other. He tried to turn the talons, the feathers. But nothing turned, nothing opened, nothing moved.

Misha began to grow anxious. Were they going to fail again? Had all this risk been taken for nothing? The darkness bothered him most of all. Should he turn on his torch? No, that was dangerous. Somebody in the street might notice the light and there would be the devil to pay. They would be accused of trying to steal something in the museum. That would be a blow to the whole troop. He knew he had to cast all this worrying out of his mind. He

had to be calm, to keep himself in hand. He had to begin from the beginning. There must be some way of opening the bird!

"How is it going?" Genka asked quietly, going up to Misha.

"Stay at your post and don't talk," Misha whispered in reply.

Genka returned to his post and Misha again bent to his task. Had Slava been wrong in thinking there was a hiding-place in the bird? Slava could not have been wrong. He always had a reason for saying things. He was not Genka. Genka could come out with a lot of nonsense, but not Slava.

Misha continued examining the bird. He mustered all his coolness, told himself he could not afford to worry, to fuss, that he had to examine every inch of the bird.

He took a long time over it. Genka went to him a few times to offer his assistance.

"You'll see, Misha," he whispered impatiently, "I'll find it in a jiffy."

Misha kept ordering him back to the corridor, but yielded in the end. Leaving Genka to examine the bird, he took Genka's place in the corridor.

"Only be careful not to break it," he warned. "That'll put the lid on everything."

"You can trust me," Genka growled back at him.

Although Genka did his best, breathed heavily and every other minute muttered, "Aha, I've found it," he too came away empty-handed.

Misha again took over, but again without result. The first beam of the rising sun was already slanting across the floor. Misha glanced at his huge watch—it was five o'clock. The museum would be opened at nine.

The boys feverishly went on with their search. They turned their attention to the pedestal—a small, round column of coloured stone. The bird was firmly cemented to its top. But the column was quite smooth. They carefully tipped it over. But there was nothing on the underside.

Possibly Slava had been mistaken after all and the hiding-place was not in the bird but somewhere else? The boys carefully examined the table, the armchairs and all the other objects in the room. The wardrobes were all that they could not examine because they were locked.

But the search was fruitless.

Misha looked at his watch. It was half past eight. Opening time was at nine. The attendant might appear at any moment now. It was strange that he was not there already, because it was his job to tidy up the museum before any visitors came.

The boys looked round to see if they had left any signs of their search and hid behind the curtain, waiting for the watchman to arrive.

Chapter 52

SECOND NIGHT IN THE MUSEUM

In their hiding-place, the boys strained their ears for the creak of the door. But there was no sound. Misha looked at his watch again. It was

exactly nine. What could that mean?

Misha glanced at his watch every minute. The minute hand moved forward slowly but surely. The watch showed a quarter past nine, then half past nine. What could the matter be? On the plaque at the entrance it was clearly written: *Open from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. Closed for lunch from 2 p.m. to 3 p.m. Daily except on....*

Suddenly Misha gaped at Genka and asked:

"What day is today?"

"Monday. Why?"

"It was Monday yesterday, when we came here."

"That's right, then it's Tuesday."

"Tuesday," Misha repeated. "The museum is closed on Tuesdays."

"How do you know?"

"The inscription on the plaque says: *Daily except on Tuesdays.*"

"I like that!" Genka drawled. "Some mess!"

"How the heck didn't I think of it!" Misha said, angry with himself. "I knew the museum is closed on Tuesdays. We left the camp on Monday and I forgot that we'd stay here until Tuesday. How didn't I think of it? What a fool!"

"That's because you do and decide things all by your sweet self. You never ask other people for advice," Genka said.

He thought this was a splendid opportunity to have a serious talk with Misha about his isolating himself from the collective.

"A fine time you've picked for moralizing!" Misha said angrily. "Why are you all trying to moralize? Slava, Zina, and now you!"

"Have they spoken to you already?" Genka asked in surprise.

"Yes. But that's not important now. We must find a way out of here. Oh, I could kick myself!"

Silently they left their hiding-place and made their way to the back door. It was locked. The boys listened. Animated cries and laughter came from the yard. Children were playing there.

They went to the front door, moved back the bolt and took the big metal hook off its rest. The door did not budge: it, too, was locked and the attendant had the key. That put the doors out of the reckoning.

The boys replaced the bolt and the hook and returned to the *Life of the Gentry* room. The only possible means of escape left to them was a window. But all the windows gave out on the street and there was a wire net between the double frames.

Weary hours dragged by. The excitement of the previous night and now hunger had worn the boys down completely. Misha kept on his feet through sheer will-power, but Genka sat on the floor and dozed with his head on his knees.

Misha decided they would sleep by turns. First Genka, then he. Genka immediately stretched out on a divan and fell fast asleep.

Misha walked about the museum, stupefied by the oppressive silence and the close air. But he courageously fought back his drowsiness. He walked about without stop, afraid to sit down even for a second.

The fauna department held his attention for a little while. The stuffed animals and birds had tricky Latin words beneath their Russian names. In glass cases were insects of all sizes, a field-mouse and a house-mouse. Misha wondered why there was a house-mouse. The field-mouse could pass muster, but the house-mouse.... Who hadn't seen one?

Two hours went by. Misha was very sleepy, but he did not wake Genka. If Genka did not get enough sleep, he would drowse while he was on duty.

For two hours longer Misha walked about as in a dream.

Finally, he woke Genka up. The latter stretched and yawned and could not understand where he was.

"Wake me up in two hours," Misha said to him, "and don't fall asleep. If you feel you want to sleep very badly, wake me up. Understand!"

"You can depend on me," Genka replied, yawning and stretching.

Misha lay down on a divan and was asleep in a trice.

He woke up without anybody waking him. It was already dark. He glanced at his "alarm clock" and got a shock. He had slept for eight hours! He jumped to his feet. Where was Genka? Misha could not find him in any of the rooms.

Where could he have got to? He could not have gone away and left him, Misha, behind! To make sure, Misha examined both doors. They were locked, as before.

Misha could not understand it and began to worry. Perhaps Genka was sleeping, curled up in some corner?

Misha looked everywhere, but Genka was nowhere to be found.

When Misha had almost given up all hope of finding Genka, he suddenly heard somebody snoring. The snoring came from the *Religion—Opium for the People* room. Yes, there was no mistake about it. But where was Genka? Misha listened again and when he finally realized where the snoring was coming from he went cold with fear: it was coming from a coffin in the middle of the room. The inscription on it said it was a shrine, which was supposed to contain somebody's remains, but which was empty, as anyone could see simply by glancing into it.

Trembling with fright, Misha went up to the coffin and lifted the lid.

He was right. Genka, with one arm under his cheek, was unconcernedly asleep in the coffin.

To leave his post! To fall asleep! Misha gave Genka such a nudge in the ribs that he nearly turned the coffin over.

"What of it?" Genka said, defending himself. "There'll be no visitors here today anyway and, besides, somebody might have heard me if I had been walking about the place. As it is, both of us have had a beauty of a sleep."

"Who gave you the right to leave your post?" Misha said, his temper rising. "If you wanted to sleep so badly you could have woken me up."

"I didn't want to," Genka replied. "I couldn't make myself do it. We've got nothing to eat and sleep was the only thing with which to stifle our hunger. And then nothing's happened, so far as I can see."

Nothing had happened, of course, but for discipline's sake Misha took Genka to task.

Sleep had refreshed them considerably and had it not been for that gnawing, empty feeling in their stomachs they would have felt quite happy.

The hours began to drag by again. And again the boys began to feel sleepy. They wandered about the museum together, then sat dozing, then Misha walked about alone while Genka dozed. In the end both fell asleep.

Chapter 53

THE STRANGER

The first thing Misha did when he woke up was to look at his watch. It was eight o'clock. He shook Genka awake and was just in time, for a few minutes later a key grated in the lock of the back door and the attendant came in.

The boys concealed themselves behind a curtain. Genka suggested getting into the coffin, but Misha rejected the idea: from where they were they could see everything, but in the coffin it was like being in a trap.

From their hiding-place, Misha and Genka heard the swish-swish of a broom and the clang of a dust-pan—the attendant was sweeping the floor. The back door was open, letting in the coolness of the morning and the ring of children's voices. The attendant went out of that door a few times, carrying the sweepings.

It was all the boys could do to keep on their feet. The two harassing nights they had spent in the museum were beginning to tell on them. The attendant, do-nothing that he was, had not opened even the ventilation panes. Time moved unbearably slowly.

When the attendant swept the floor near their hiding-place, the boys held their breath. They were afraid he would draw the curtain, for behind it the dust was the thickest. But the attendant evidently thought that since the floor behind the curtain had not been swept for a year there was no sense in, doing it now. He was so close that he even brushed Misha's feet with his broom. With bated breath the boys expected him to draw the curtain at any moment. But no! The shuffling footfalls receded, as did the sounds made by the broom and the dust-pan.

Nine o'clock. With his nerves on edge, Misha counted off the minutes: as soon as the attendant opened the front door and went into one of the rooms, they would make a dash for the street.

The hook rang against the wall, the wooden bolt banged open, a key turned in the lock and a bright strip of sunlight fell across the floor at the farther end of the corridor. The door was open! Make ready! The old man would go into one of the back rooms.

They heard his footsteps. But what was that? He was not alone. He was talking with somebody.

Misha looked through a hole in the curtain. Behind the attendant walked

a tall man in a green suit. He limped slightly, dragging one foot. They were heading for the *Life of the Gentry* room, where Misha and Genka were hiding.

The attendant and the man in the green suit halted in front of the curtain.

"Will you be drawing?" the attendant asked. "Just a sketch," replied the man in the green suit, taking a notebook and a pencil from his pocket.

"Will you require a chair?" "No, thank you. Don't bother. That will be all." The attendant shuffled away.

The stranger drew rapidly in his notebook. He was about thirty-five or forty, smooth-shaven, with sleek, reddish hair, smart-looking, tensed, in a green suit and a white, starched collar. The old man's footsteps died away.

What happened next made the boys gape with wonder.

The stranger stuffed the notebook into his pocket, took down the rope, went to the bronze bird, raised the head, put a folded piece of paper under it, replaced the head, rehung the rope, and resumed his drawing.

He did all that very quickly, but Misha noticed that he had raised the bird's head with his left hand. With two fingers of his right hand he had pressed the bird's eyes. That was why he hadn't been able to open the bird!



Then the stranger put the notebook back into his pocket again and went to join the old man. Soon the boys could hear their voices. They went past the boys' hiding-place to the exit.

"Good-bye and thank you very much," the stranger said, shaking the attendant by his hand and evidently leaving a tip in it.

The old man bowed low, mumbling:

"Thank you, thank you very much. Good-bye."

Then he shuffled his way back into the corridor. The moment he went round the corner, the boys darted out of their hiding-place, noiselessly went to the front door and, pretending they had just come in, banged the door. Speaking in loud voices, they went to the *Life of the Gentry* room.

The attendant appeared and looked suspiciously at them.

"You here again?"

"We didn't manage to see everything on Saturday," Misha replied.

"No end of people seem to want to see this room," the old man said, shaking his head.

"Everybody is studying how the gentry lived," Misha explained, "and that is why they are coming here."

"The gentry have been kicked out a long time ago and yet people want to know about them. Evidently the way they lived was better," the old man said and slowly walked away.

"A geezer of the old regime," Genka whispered after him. The attendant disappeared round a corner.

Misha lifted the rope a little, went to the bird and, imitating the stranger, took hold of the bird's head with his left hand and pressed its eyes with two ringers of his right hand. The bird did not open.

He pressed harder—and suddenly the bird's head fell back.

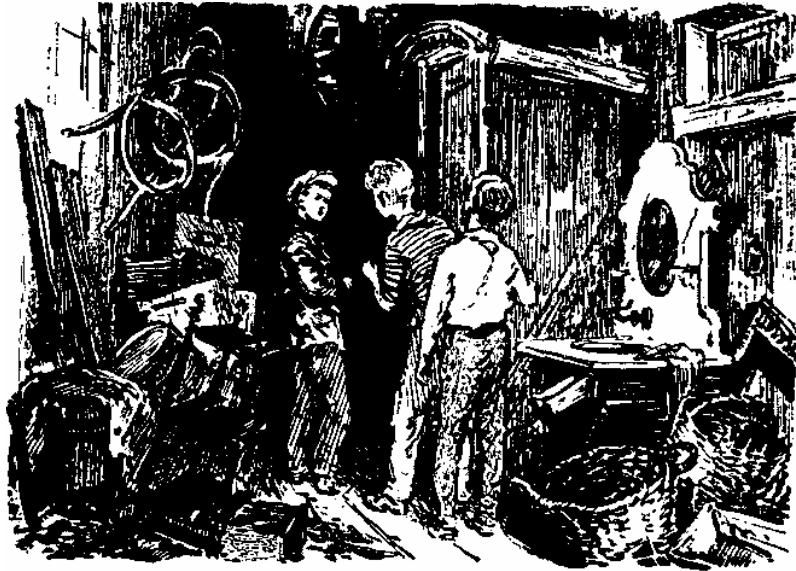
In a recess lay the note. Misha took it out and read it. There was only one line:

"Next Wednesday by the day train."

Misha replaced the note, lowered the bird's head over the hiding-place and hung up the rope.

The boys left the museum and hurried to the railway station.





Part V

THE SECRET OF THE BRONZE BIRD

Chapter 54

KIT OVEREATS

"Next Wednesday by the day train." That was not hard to understand: somebody would come on Wednesday next by the day train. The note had obviously been left for the "countess." The hiding-place in the museum was a means of communication between her and the man in the green suit.

Wednesday. Kuzmin was murdered on a Wednesday.

Since there was a hiding-place in the small bird, it was reasonable to expect that there was one in the bird on the manor. That had to be checked. But how? Of course, now that Misha and his friends had gained access to the servants' hall their chances of getting at the bronze bird had increased. But.... But Seva was recovering with catastrophic speed.

Misha made him hold the thermometer for half an hour at a stretch. But the column of mercury never rose above the 98° mark. Then the doctor came and declared that Seva was well and could leave his bed and go back to the camp. That meant they would have to leave the servants' hall. What was to be done?

Oh, if only somebody fell ill. Misha walked about the camp, hopefully scrutinizing everybody and asking after their health. But the youngsters never felt better in their lives. Nobody complained of anything. As a last resort, Misha said to the Bleater:

"We're always caught napping when somebody falls ill. From what I know about medicine, the first thing is to prevent disease." The Bleater was touched to the quick.

"I'm always talking about disease prevention," he said, "but nobody listens to me. And you're the first...."

"Keep your shirt on," Misha said, avoiding an argument. We've got to make use of the hospital while it's still at our disposal. Examine everybody and if you find anything in anybody that worries you, send him to the hospital immediately. We'll call the doctor tomorrow. Be thorough. I won't hold it against you if you make a mistake and put someone in bed who's not ill at all. It is the kind of mistake I can condone."

The Bleater zealously set about his task. He took everybody's temperature. But this dragged out for a long time because there was only one thermometer in the camp. While one of the youngsters held it under his arm-pit, the Bleater examined the throat of another. He regarded himself as a great throat specialist. His mother worked in an out-patient hospital for ear, nose and throat cases.

"Open your jaws wider," the Bleater said, looking into the mouths of his victims, and as he was short of stature he had to stand on his toes.

Every time he looked into somebody's mouth, he meaningfully declared:

"Hm. There's a reddishness. Bad."

He would have been quite content to drag all his "patients" to the hospital by turn. ;

But who wanted to stay in bed in this heat! Even a real patient would not have admitted he was ill. In the end, everybody got fed up. They had their fill of the Bleater, who stuck his brows into their mouths, and of that absurd thermometer. Misha saw that his idea¹ was a flop. It had been silly to think that any healthy youngster could be persuaded he was ill. Misha gave it up. It could not be helped. They would have to clear out of the servants' hall tomorrow. They would have to say good-bye to such a fine opportunity of penetrating into the house and getting at the bronze bird. :

In spite of everything, a saviour did appear. He appeared in the image of Kit, an emaciated-looking, suffering Kit, who moaned and held himself by the stomach. Kit had overeaten!

Misha's joy knew no bounds. Kit would get well, of course. This was not the first time he had overeaten. A day or two in bed and he would be as good as new. There could be no doubt that this was the result of overeating when he had gone with Slava to Moscow for the stores. But Misha did not question him on that score. The important thing was that he had overeaten. That was very important and pleasant. The doctor would come tomorrow, give him a dose of castor-oil or Epsom salts, but at the moment he had to be put in bed in place of Seva, who was being held a virtual prisoner.

Kit was hurried to the servants' hall. Seva, overjoyed, rushed out of the "hospital" as fast as his legs could carry him.

The "countess" said nothing when she learned that one patient had been supplanted by another. She turned on her heel and walked away. But the doctor arrived soon after, though Misha did not call him.

"What's happened this time?" he asked, getting down from his carriage and hitching the horse to a tree although it was clear at a glance that the heavy, lazy horse would never move away on its own.

"Another of our boys has fallen seriously ill," Misha informed him.

"We'll see," the doctor said, frowning, and went into the house.

An examination confirmed that Kit was really ill. The doctor suspected it was dysentery, but Misha explained that Kit had attacks of indigestion approximately once every fortnight.

The doctor wrote out a prescription and said that Kit had to be put on a strict diet. Kit's spirits fell when he heard that.

Then, his frown deeper than ever, the doctor went to see the "countess," who was waiting for him near the verandah.

Misha did not hear their conversation. But when the doctor returned, he looked angry. His parting words were:

"The boy must stay in bed until I say he can get up. Don't forget what I said about putting him on a strict diet. He must have complete rest. Pay no attention to circumstances that don't concern you."

From that Misha concluded that it was the "countess" who had called the doctor to make him send the boys away from the manor. But nothing came of that.

The next morning, the "countess" took the train to town, obviously to complain about the troop and to get them forced out of the manor and from the grounds.

Let her go! She thought Serov had more authority than anybody else, but she was mistaken. In her absence, they would go into the house and examine the bronze bird. There was nothing reprehensible in that. The manor did not belong to her but to the state. She was only the caretaker. That made it not a private house but the property of the people.

Chapter 55

IN THE MYSTERIOUS HOUSE

Slava and the Bleater were assigned to look after Kit. The Bleater was to sit in the hall at his bedside, and Slava—to keep a watch outside. Their orders were to give two short and one long whistle at the least sign of danger.

The low massive door with peeling dark-brown paint hung unsteadily on rusty nails and hinges. The boys pushed it open and found themselves in a short corridor piled up with all sorts of junk.

Kit, too, wanted to take a look, but he was given a bowl of rice-water and that kept him quiet.

The corridor, as we have seen, was full of junk of all sorts: broken armchairs, a tumble-down bookstand, a wash-stand with a

cracked marble top and an empty oval which had once held a mirror, boxes, baskets and barrels. But Misha noticed that the middle of the corridor was not obstructed and formed a narrow passageway. It had been made by the "countess," of course, so that she could spy on them. The passage ended

at the iron steps of a spiral staircase.

' The boys drew a plan of the house to have it in case it would be needed later on. The recess with the bronze bird was in the facade, closer to the left side of the house, while the servants' hall was at the back, closer to the right side. The task, therefore, was to reach the loft, to find the way from the back to the front part of the house and then to cross from the right to the left side. That was not easy to do, because the boys had to find their way about noiselessly in a strange house.

As long as the door of the servants' hall was open, it was possible to make out the different objects, but the moment Misha closed it, the small corridor was plunged into inky blackness. Tiny beams of light came through the lattices in the iron steps of the spiral staircase. The darkness below and the rays of light coming from the ceiling gave the impression that there were people on the floor above, and that made the whole enterprise frightening.

"Perhaps we could do it in a much simpler way?" Genka whispered. "We could go outside, climb to the verandah and get to the recess along the ledge. We'll lose ourselves in this house."

"No," Misha said, also speaking in a whisper, "somebody might see us. If you're afraid, you can stay here."

"I'm not afraid of anything," Genka growled in reply.

There was an unearthly stillness all around. Not even Kit's noisy champing could be heard—perhaps because he had finished the rice-water.

Doing their best not to stumble over anything in the darkness, the boys went up to the staircase. Misha led the way, with Genka behind him. No sooner did they put their feet on the iron steps than the staircase began to clang and squeak. If anybody was in the house, they would be sure to be heard. Genka thought the staircase would fall on their heads: it was a mystery to him how it held in place. It was very narrow and steep, and had small triangular pieces of metal for steps. Genka missed a step and bruised his knee. Mentally he cursed the landlord system that doomed servants to climb stairs such as these. You had to spin like a top, with one shoulder against the wall and the other against an iron post, while your head kept bumping against something all the time.

They finally reached the first floor, finding themselves in another corridor, somewhat longer than the one below. It extended along the entire outer wall and the window made it look like a gallery. The panes were made of numerous pieces of coloured glass, most of which were broken. The boys saw the yard and the sheds. That meant they were still in the back part of the house.

In the corridor, there were two tall doors that had once been white: one was in the middle and the other at the far end.

The boys cautiously opened the first door. They saw an empty hall with dilapidated, old-fashioned furniture scattered about haphazardly.

A chandelier with numerous pieces of glass hung from the ceiling. The high, arrow-shaped windows were partially boarded up and partially covered with something that looked like curtains. Through them the boys could see the park, the orchard, the river and the flag on the flag-pole in the

camp. The sight of that small, sharp-cornered little flag fluttering lazily in the breeze heartened them. All thought of danger left their minds and it seemed to them that all this was just a fascinating game. Their spirits rose because now they could see everything, even their camp, while nobody could see them. Besides, they had reached the façade and that was something.

The hall had three doors—one through which the boys had entered, and one on either side. The side doors were locked and the boys had to return to the corridor and try the second door.

It led to yet another corridor, about as long as the second, but it only had a small round window and a small panel door on the right.

The boys opened the door and found two adjoining rooms. The first was empty. The second was locked. Looking through the keyhole, they saw an unmade bed, a night-table, a chest of drawers, a desk with a semicircular top and two armchairs. This was probably the old woman's bedroom.

In the room where the boys were now standing there was a stairwell. It was boarded up on all sides and looked like a huge box. Undoubtedly, it led to the loft. But the stairs began in the locked bedroom. The "countess," the boys concluded, had purposely chosen that room for her bedroom so that nobody could go up that staircase to the loft.

The boys tried to open the door of the bedroom, but it did not move. Through a slit it could be seen that it had two locks. They couldn't very well force the door open!

So Misha and Genka turned their attention to the boards around the stairwell. They barely held in place. A crowbar was all that was needed to wrench them free. But the boys had nothing with them that would serve the purpose. Misha told Genka to go down to the corridor on the ground floor and look for a crowbar.

"A piece of piping will do just as well," Misha said, "so long as it can be wedged between the boards. Only be careful and make no noise."

Genka soon returned with a pair of fire-place tongs and a big, broken flat-iron. The boys forced the tongs between the boards and, with the aid of the iron, tore off two of them.

The opening was big enough to let them through. They climbed the straight and fairly wide wooden staircase leading to the loft—a low, square room filled with ramshackle furniture. As in the corridor on the ground floor, a narrow passage had been made through the furniture to the windows. There were three windows—one on either side, which was glazed, and one in the middle, which was closed with shutters. The shutters were fastened with a simple, rusty hook. The boys flipped back the hook and opened the shutters. In the recess stood the bronze bird.

It had its back to them. It was about a metre high and the span of its wings was about a metre and a half.



The window gave an excellent view of the grounds and of all the approaches to the house.

Misha and Genka could see the camp clearly. They saw quite a few of the troop and it was perfectly obvious they were loafing about: some were strolling aimlessly, others, it seemed, were playing a game, but neither Misha nor Genka could tell what it was. They came together, then parted, then came together again. They looked ridiculous and funny.

But this was not the time to allow their attention to be diverted. They had to hurry if they wanted to learn the secret of the bronze bird.

As in the museum, Misha carefully put two fingers of his right hand on the bird's eyes and then pressed hard.

It worked! The bird's head folded back. So there *was* a hiding-place here as well!

Misha's guess had been correct.

He put his hand into the hiding-place, found a paper and drew it out.

It was a rolled-up drawing made on ordinary tracing-paper. The boys untied the ribbon and unfolded the drawing. On it were lines and figures.

There was no time to study it. They had to take it with them, make a

copy and put it back before the "countess" returned.

Misha closed the bird and hooked the shutters. Then the boys went down to the first floor, replaced the boards on the stairwell and reached the servants' hall by way of the spiral staircase.

They closed the door and drove the nails back into the old holes so that the "countess" would not guess the door had been opened.

Chapter 56

THE DRAWING

Kit had finished the rice-water long ago and was now lying in bed, stretching languidly and screwing up his eyes with pleasure. It was dark and dusty in the hall. Short, narrow beams of sunlight lay across the floor with countless particles of dust swarming in them.

"Come with us, Slava," Misha said, giving a slight nod to show that all was well. "You, Bleater, stay here. I'll send somebody to relieve you."

"Send something to eat," Kit groaned.

"Do you want to get well or not?" the Bleater demanded angrily. "Can't you stay on a diet for one day, for just one single day?"

"No," Kit admitted with a sigh.

Leaving them to their argument, Misha, Genka and Slava went outside.

Forgetting their promise to send somebody to relieve the Bleater, they skirted round the camp, went across a field to a small thicket, where they sat down on the ground and unfolded the drawing.

The sheet of tracing-paper was about the size of foolscap. On the sides were letters giving the cardinal points of the compass: *N. S. E. W.*

Over the letter *S* was a picture of the facade of the manor. From it a straight line ran due north, then turned first to the north-west, then west and to the north again. Four trees were drawn where the line ended.

Over each section of the line was the figure *l*, and beneath the angle of each turn was a figure giving the angle: 135° , 135° and 90° . Except for a drawing of the bronze bird in the right-hand corner, there was nothing else on the paper. The bird was only given as the family emblem.

The boys silently studied the drawing, then exchanged glances. They did not know what to believe. Had they found the secret? They were quite sure that the drawing would help to solve the riddle.

Genka was the first to break the silence. In a quiet tone of voice, as though everything went without saying, he declared:

"It's clear as daylight. We can go and look for the treasure whenever we like."

"Some of it is clear and some isn't," Slava noted. "We don't know what the unit giving the length of the sections stands for. What does the figure *l* mean?"

"*Verst*," Genka said with a condescending smile. "In the old days everything was given in *versts*."

"What about *arshins* and *sazhens*!" Slava said. "You make me laugh," Genka said. "If *arshins* or *sazhens* were meant, that would mean the treasure is close to the house. But you've got woods in these parts and they're exactly four *versts* from the house. If you like," Genka added with a shrug, "we can first check the thing in *arshins* and in *sazhens*. But when you hide something, you want to hide it well."

Misha suggested they stop arguing and reason logically. "Let's think this out logically," he said. "Now here's the situation: the house, the bronze bird, is the starting point. Do you agree?" Slava and Genka nodded.

"Well then," Misha continued, "from there we have to proceed due north for one *verst*."

"Or one *arshin*, *sazhen*, or perhaps a metre or a kilometre," Slava persisted.

"That's possible," Misha agreed, "although I think Genka's right: the figures stand for *versts*. Let's calculate the thing in *versts*, conditionally of course."

"In that case, I don't mind," Slava said.

"Don't interrupt," Genka said curtly. "Go on, Misha."

"Now that we've agreed on that," Misha said, "we'll go due north for one *verst*, then turn to the north-west at an angle of one hundred and thirty-five degrees."

"Turn. . ." Genka prompted.

"Yes, turn," Misha said, "and go another *verst*."

"That's where we turn again," Genka put in.

"Yes, again one hundred and thirty-five degrees and cover the third *verst*. After that...."

"We make the last turn," Genka said loudly and impatiently.

"Yes, we turn ninety degrees at the last turning and proceed due north for yet another *verst* and...."

"... stop at the four trees," Genka exclaimed, springing up from the ground, "dig our spades into the ground and find the buried treasure. It might even be that famous Pansy diamond."

"Not Pansy but Sansy," Slava corrected him.

The boys felt very pleased with themselves.

"Just think," Genka laughed, "those fools out in the woods are searching and digging with the sweat pouring down their faces. They've probably lost weight with their digging, the poor devils, and they don't know where to dig. But we know."

Misha did not jump or cut capers like Genka. He lay on the ground, smiling with self-satisfaction.

"Yes," he said, "we've got the key in our hands. Of course, we don't know what we'll find. I doubt if it's that Sansy-Pansy diamond, but if people took such pains to hide it and others are looking for it so doggedly, it must be valuable."

Genka went on laughing.

"What a fox the 'countess' is! She's been sitting on this drawing, hiding it and waiting for Soviet power to be overthrown and for her counts to return."

But the drawing is now in our hands."

At the mention of the "countess," doubts began to creep into Misha's mind. If it was so simple to find the treasure by following the instructions in the drawing, then why had the "countess" not found it? The men they had seen in the woods were digging there with her knowledge, for she was the one who had sent them those sacks.

Slava's thoughts were running along the same lines.

"It's strange that they haven't found the treasure," he said. "This drawing has been in the bird for at least six years after the Revolution and the 'countess' knows that it's there. That means those men and the boatman also know of its existence. And yet they're digging in the woods."

"She's leading them a dance!" Genka shouted. "Can't you see that? The boatman is watching her. That shows he doesn't trust her. Why? Because she keeps showing him the wrong places and doesn't tell him where she's keeping this drawing."

"Why doesn't she dig the treasure up herself?"

"Think an old woman can do that? Think she can dig it out? But even if she could, she probably doesn't want to. What does she need the treasure for? What could she do with it? Her job is to see that nobody touches it until the count returns."

Slava agreed that there was sense in what Genka said. Misha was of the same opinion. Some doubts lingered on, but he terribly wanted to believe that the buried treasure was now within reach and that their efforts had been crowned with success. He was eager to *find* out if his deduction was correct.

"Let's not lose any time," he said, getting up, "and follow this route right now."

Genka and Slava willingly assented. They too were burning to see where the treasure was hidden.

"As my stride is exactly one *arshin*" Misha said, "I'll do the measuring. Only don't get me muddled."

"What about spades?" Genka cried. "We need spades to dig the treasure up."

But Misha was against that. Everything would be lost if the boatman saw them carrying spades. They would dig at night and in preparation for that they would memorize the place and the road to it.

"I disagree with that," Genka grumbled.

He wanted to start digging at once.

Chapter 57

TREASURE-HUNTERS

They remembered their promise to relieve the Bleater only when they saw him standing at the door of the servants' hall.

"It's an outrage," the Bleater shouted angrily. "I've been waiting for an hour and a half! It's low-down. Anybody else would have gone away long

ago. You're taking advantage of my sense of duty. Decent people don't do that. Downright mockery, that's what it is!"

Misha calmed him and let him return to the camp with orders to send Igor. Still giving vent to his indignation, the Bleater marched off.

The moans of the hungry Kit came from the servants' hall. But the boys paid not the slightest attention to them.

Misha, compass in hand and facing northward, stood in front of the house. The compass needle was perpendicular to the house.

"Now listen," Misha said. "I don't want to hear a word from you until we reach the turning. And now let's go."

The boys set off with Misha in front. He counted the steps, trying to make his stride exactly one *arshin* long. It was his normal stride when he walked without exertion and he knew that if he made it even a little longer the exertion would show.

He held the compass in front of him. Actually, he did not need it because the drive itself led due north.

Soon the drive gave way to a path across a field which, as the compass showed, likewise led due north.

Misha did not have to worry about losing count of his steps. Genka and Slava were striding after him, mumbling as they counted the steps with deep concentration. This monotonous mumbling disturbed Misha, but he said nothing as he was afraid that that would put him off. In the end, when Misha announced that he had counted a thousand five hundred steps, it turned out that Genka's figure was twelve higher, while Slava's was eight lower.

But the road veered to the north-east of itself. The boys measured the angle—it was a hundred and thirty-five degrees. The old count had certainly had a poor imagination. That was the result of the aristocracy's degeneration....

The boys went on with their task. The monotonous mumbling behind Misha's back was resumed. The road took them exactly to the north-east. It seemed as though it had been specially laid out to the place where the treasure was buried. This was the very route that Misha and Longshanks had taken when they went to the Goligin Brushwood Road.



At the end of the second *verst* they found that the road again turned one hundred and thirty-five degrees to the west.

"It's going swimmingly," Genka said, wiping the sweat off his forehead. "The count gave the bearings exactly."

"The route's too primitive," Slava noted. "It follows the road all the time."

"That's how it should be. You don't imagine the count wanted to hurt his precious feet by tripping over into holes and ruts."

At the end of the third *verst*, the road turned sharply to the north at a right angle.

The last lap brought them to the fringe of a woods, which stood in front of them like a wall. It was the woods they had gone through to get to the Goligin Brushwood Road.

"Clearly," Genka said, pointing at the trees, "the treasure's buried beneath those four trees."

Misha and Slava were also looking at the trees. Yes, the treasure was evidently there. At any rate, it was in the clearing where they now found themselves. It was uneven and full of mounds. For a moment, the 'suspicion crossed Misha's mind that somebody had already dug the ground up, but there was no sign of freshly upturned soil—all the mounds were overgrown with grass. Perhaps tree-stumps had once been rooted out here. However that may be, this was the spot indicated in the drawing. That meant the treasure was beneath one of the mounds. He would put the whole troop on the job. The count proved to be not as simple as he had at first thought! Everybody was hunting for the treasure in the woods, but it was buried here, on the fringe of the woods, in the most prominent place where nobody so much as thought of looking.

The boys sat down on the grass. The leaves in the crowns of the trees rustled and birds whistled and chirped. Somewhere in the distance a dog was barking.

Genka grunted and whispered:

"Those asses are searching for the treasure in the swamp. Treasure-

hunters they call themselves!"

"Still, it's strange that they're digging in this very woods," Slava said.

"There's nothing strange in that," Genka protested. "They're misinformed. They were told to look in the woods. But they don't know where."

"When will we start digging?" Slava asked. "I suggest we don't put it off for too long," Genka said. "Don't forget that the stranger in the green suit is coming on Wednesday. And today's already Friday."

"Yes, we can't put it off," Misha agreed, "but we must go about it sensibly. First, we must make a copy of the drawing and put the original back, otherwise the countess will take precautionary measures."

"You're right," Genka said, "but when will we start digging?"

"We must get witnesses and representatives of the authorities. You can never tell what we'll find," Misha declared.

Genka was furious. What! Tell the chairman of the Village Soviet? Why, he would immediately inform Yerofeyev, and the latter would tell the boatman.

"That is one thing he'll not tell him," Misha calmed him. "We'll also call representatives from the uyezd and from the gubernia. Hidden treasure is state property. Everything must be done legally."

"It's always like that," Genka said with disappointment. "We do all the donkey work, risk our lives and in the end somebody else comes along and takes the cake. It's not fair!"

Chapter 58

THE DOCTOR'S STORY

The boys turned homeward. They were tired but very happy. It's not everyone who solves puzzles like this, but they had done it twice: the first time it was the secret of the dirk and now it was the mystery of the bronze bird.

Reaching the manor, Misha told Genka and Slava to go on to the camp and went into the servants' hall to find out how Kit was and, on the whole, to check the situation there.

The doctor was sitting at Kit's bedside.

"I'm glad you've come," he said when he saw Misha. "He," he nodded towards Kit, "can get up, but he must watch his diet."

This was a fix! It had not entered Misha's plans to let Kit out of the house. They would lose their access to the servants' hall and the possibility of going into the house once more, at least to put the drawing back. Misha instantly thought of a reply.

"He'll get up and overeat again the next minute. We know him well. If he has to be on a diet it's best to keep him in bed."

"Is he such a glutton?"

"The biggest in the world."

"Can't you control yourself?" the doctor asked Kit.

"No," Kit confessed.

"But he needs fresh air," the doctor said, "and as for the diet, let him make it a point of discipline."

"If he gets up everything will be lost," Misha said with desperation.

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm speaking generally," Misha said hastily. "He'll fall ill again and we'll have nowhere to put him. Nobody will let us into this place again. We'll have to keep him in a tent and you said yourself that a tent is no place for a sick person."

"We'll always find where to put a patient," the doctor replied, "and he's stayed in bed long enough."

"You mean I can get up?" Kit asked, throwing back his blanket.

"Yes."

Saying no more, Kit got out of bed and without looking at Misha, went out of the hall. A minute later his voice came from the direction of the camp-fire where supper was being cooked.

Misha and the doctor also went to the camp. The doctor had left his horse there.

- After they had gone a few steps along the drive, the doctor stopped and turned his head. Misha intercepted his gaze. He was looking at the bronze bird.

"What does that bronze bird stand for?" Misha asked. "I can't see why it's there at all."

The doctor took off his pince-nez, wiped it, and put it on again, throwing the black, twisted thread over his ear.

"It's a famous bird," he laughed. "Quite a few people have gone off their heads because of it."

"Really?" Misha said, excited that the doctor could tell him something.

"It's an old and long story," the doctor said, "and, to tell you the truth, it's dull."

"Please, I'd like to hear it," Misha said. "We're interested in history. The boys keep asking me about the bird, but I can't tell them anything."

"It's a long, very long story," the doctor repeated. "Some other time."

"Please tell it to me now," Misha pleaded, "while we're walking to your horse."

"All right," the doctor said, slowing down his pace. "It's quite a silly story really. A mixture of lordly tyranny and provincial romanticism. I must tell you that the counts Karagayev are an ancient though poverty-stricken family. The line, so people say, goes back to a Tatar *murza*, who came to Russia with the Golden Horde. But the family lost its wealth and fell into decay especially after Elizabeth executed One of* the counts and his son and had their bodies thrown into a swamp."

"So the story about the Goligin Brushwood Road is true?" Misha asked with amazement.

"Yes," the doctor said, "it is a historical fact. They were executed and trampled underfoot on the brushwood road. The family seat was seized by

the crown and the family all but scattered. However, thanks to a lucky match between one of the counts and the daughter of a Demidov, the Karagayevs regained their feet and the family came to own estates and mines in the Urals."

"I've heard something about that," Misha said.

"The family," the doctor continued, "had a passion for precious stones, a mania you might even call it. That was particularly true of the last count. He was a great lover and judge of diamonds. But he was a dreamer and a mystic. He worked his property in the Urals on a big scale, but the diamonds were small and, as you know, small diamonds are not worth much. The price of a diamond rises almost geometrically with its size. The stones from his mines were small, but he spread rumours that some of his finds were outstanding. A check showed that it was all bluff. He became such an inveterate liar that not only did people stop believing him but he was very nearly taken to court for counterfeiting some stone. He was threatened with bankruptcy. At the trial, the son attempted to have the old man declared insane. He wanted me to help him, but I refused and almost spoilt the case for him. Since then, he has been afraid of me. He found some people who helped him to get the inheritance before the old man died. The old count went abroad. But he had the last laugh."

The doctor and Misha reached the carriage. The doctor got in, lit a cigarette and continued:

"Although his heir was a fool, he was also a great scoundrel. That woman," he nodded in the direction of the house, "played an odious role in the whole affair."

"You mean the countess?"

"She's no countess. But she was once a beautiful woman." The doctor paused, a shadow flitting across his face. "A beautiful woman," he repeated, "only nothing has remained of her beauty. Yes, as I was saying, the young count.... The local peasants called him Rouble Twenty.... He was born lame. He limped a little but he was very well built. Now, this is how his father punished him...."

The doctor paused again as though trying to recall the story, then went on:

"The most amazing thing was that fables were not all that the old count told. Just before the trial he announced that he had found two diamonds of nearly 50 carats each. He went so far as to show them. But nobody believed him, of course. Yet the diamonds proved to be real. That was confirmed by Dutch jewellers. And one day the count sent his son a letter that ran something like this:

" 'I have taken one ,of the diamonds with me and have hidden the other. Since you proved smart enough to drive me out of the house, we'll see if you're smart enough to find that diamond. Your family emblem shows you where it is hidden.' That is approximately what the old count wrote. It was cruel revenge. The search for that diamond proved to be the undoing of this family. They searched for it before the Revolution. They dug up every inch of the ground around here and quarrelled among themselves. Some went

mad, others poisoned or shot themselves."

"And they didn't find it?" Misha asked anxiously. It was all he could do to refrain from shouting, "I know where the hiding-place is! I know where the diamond is buried!"

The doctor shook his head.

"You can't imagine what went on here. But they found nothing."

Doing his best to curb his excitement, Misha asked:

"But the count wrote that it's connected with the family emblem. What did he have in mind?"

He asked his question without looking up, for he was afraid that his eyes would betray him.

The doctor sat astride the carriage, picked up the reins and took the whip, which was sticking out of a small leather pocket.

"What he had in mind? The emblem. That bird," the doctor said, pointing with his whip at the house where the bronze bird gleamed golden in the rays of the setting sun. "That eagle was supposed to provide the answer."

With an affected laugh, Misha asked:

"How can the eagle provide an answer? It can't talk."

"That is true, but inside the bird there is a hiding-place."

"What did you say?" Misha asked, scarcely able to pronounce the words.

The doctor looked at him.

"What is the matter with you?"

"Nothing," Misha said with a forced smile, struggling to control himself. "I never thought there was a hiding-place in the bird."

"Yes, there is a hiding-place," the doctor said, "and a very simple one, too. The head folds back when you press the eyes. An ordinary spring."

Stunned, Misha gazed at the doctor, but the latter did not notice the state he was in and continued:

"There was a drawing in the hiding-place. According to it, the diamond is hidden in the woods about four *versts* from here. They dug up the whole woods and even today some odd chaps are digging Way there. True, the fever has dropped a little, but they are still digging."

"And they all knew about that drawing?" Misha mumbled miserably.

"Yes, of course. At first it was kept secret, but everybody saw them digging in the woods and it was impossible to keep it a secret for any length of time. Almost everybody in the village had a copy of the drawing."

"But perhaps, perhaps ... it was not the real drawing," Misha said in a crushed voice.

"There's only one plan. All the people in the neighbourhood knew it by heart. A *verst* to the north, another to the north-west, then a *verst*, I think, due west. I can't vouch for it, it was so long ago. But everybody knew it by heart and there was even a song about it:

*If a verst you will go,
A diamond will you 'find;
Another you will go,
Another will you find;*

*A third you will go,
Nothing will you find....*

"That's the song." The doctor loosened the reins. "Now you know the whole story. Well, all right. Don't forget to restrain your patient and give him less to eat. Keep him on a diet for a while."

"A diet... yes ... of course..." Misha repeated without knowing what he was saying. His eyes dully followed the doctor, gazing at his broad back in the black frock-coat bobbing up and down as the carriage took the pits and bumps, behind the huge horse that walked with a heavy gait, lazily whisking the gad-flies away with its tail.

Chapter 59

IS ALL REALLY LOST?

His head in a whirl, Misha returned to the camp. He was met by the usual evening bustle. The youngsters were cooking supper, washing themselves before turning in, putting away their collections of flowers and their albums, or making up the beds in the tents. Some of the girls were correcting the exercise-books of the villagers attending the illiteracy-abolition class. It was the time of the evening when everybody was tired but was sorry that the day was ending, when it was particularly lively because the whole troop was in camp; the day was waning and haste had to be made to take advantage of the last of the daylight.

Misha carried out his duties mechanically. The thought of the rebuff he had just received never left his head. What humiliation! All their efforts had been in vain. Those agonizing nights in the museum, the night expedition to the Goligin Brushwood Road, the search for the bronze bird in the manor, the discovery of the hiding-place and the stealing of the drawing—all that had been futile, a waste of time. He had imagined he was cleverer than everybody else. If only nobody found out! Genka and Slava could be trusted to keep their mouths shut—they too had made fools of themselves. But how was he to tell them the truth? His prestige would suffer an irreparable blow.

Genka and Slava were in the best of spirits. They had no 'idea of what Misha was thinking and walked about the camp arm-in-arm, exchanging mysterious whispers and giving their friends good-natured, indulgent looks, which as much as said: innocent children having their usual fun and quite unaware that soon a tremendous, startling secret would be opened to them!

Seeing Misha, they went up to him and Genka whispered conspiratorially that he had found a page of tracing-paper in a book and that if they were to put it over the drawing they could make an excellent copy. Misha nodded, giving Genka to understand that he could take the page out of the book and use it to make a copy of the drawing.

Genka added that this book contained not one but three such pages and that it would be a good idea to make three copies. If they did that, each

could have a copy. Just in case one of the copies was lost. It was useful to have three copies. You could never tell what might happen in such a dangerous undertaking. You had to be ready to meet all contingencies.

Misha agreed to that as well.

Then Genka said that since it was already dark, they would make the copies in the morning, when the troop would go to the village. Misha agreed. Slava noted that he and Genka would have to be excused from work in the club. Misha made no objection. He let his friends have their way in everything. It was all useless anyway, but he could not summon up enough courage to tell them the truth. Let them busy themselves with anything they liked so long as that kept them from asking questions.

The next morning, Misha woke up with a headache and with a feeling of physical weakness that people experience after a restless night. But, as usual, he lined up the troop after breakfast and marched them to the village. Genka and Slava were left behind on duty, so that in their spare time they could make copies of the drawing.

Misha's sombre thoughts followed him into the club. He took no part in anything, but sat on a bench and sadly gazed at the future Young Pioneers. They had been divided into sections, knew the rules and regulations, had studied the text of the solemn oath, but could not learn to march. Each knew his right hand from his left, but at the order: "Right turn," invariably turned to the left, and at the order: "Left turn," turned to the right. At the order: "About turn," they bumped into each other. They could not march in step. What could be simpler: "Left, right, left, right." But no, they fell out of step each time. One's stride was long, another's short, some skipped, others dragged their feet like invalids, and still others kept stepping on the heels of those in front of them.

Then look how they stood in line! Some stuck their stomachs out, others had their toes a foot apart. If you told them to take in their stomachs, they'd bend over almost to the ground. Some were barefoot, others wore felt boots in this heat! If you gave the order, "Eyes right," you'd get a semicircle instead of a straight line: each would move up to get a good view of the chap on the right flank in spite of your explaining that it's only the fifth man from you that you had to see.

Then take the order: "Count off by twos!" They had never had a case when it was carried out flawlessly. Some would repeat their number twice, while others would keep silent altogether. No amount of coaxing got anything out of them. They'd keep silent and look at you with a timid smile. Especially the girls. Were they shy, or what?

But even their funny, clumsy turns could not take Misha's mind off the drawing.

All right, let the drawing be worthless. But there must be something in it that was not. Not only he, but others had looked for it, and they were still looking. The "countess," let's assume, was mad, she had lost her mind because of the diamonds, but the man in the green suit was a fact, and his secret correspondence with the "countess" was also a fact. So was Kuzmin's murder.... Let there be no hidden treasure. They were not after diamonds.

All they wanted was to prove Nikolai's innocence. Would they give up just because they, like scores of other people, had taken the treasure-bait?

Musing in this fashion, Misha kept his eyes on the clearing where the Young Pioneers were drilling. Why was it so difficult for them to stand in line? Take the Fly, for example. He walked normally, was a fast runner, but when he was in line he limped for no good reason, dragged one foot, shortening his stride. A real Rouble Twenty, the doctor had said about the young count.

Wait a minute!

Misha half-rose as the thought crossed his mind.

The man in the green suit also limped and dragged one of his feet. The same man in the green suit they had seen in the museum. The man who was secretly corresponding with the "countess." Was he the young Count Karagayev? So far as Misha knew, all the counts had fled to Paris. Perhaps, not all of them? Perhaps he was still hoping to find the diamond, which had been so cleverly hidden by his father. It was quite possible! That was probably why he did not show himself at the manor—he was afraid he'd be recognized. He was due on Wednesday.

Chapter 60

THE COPY

While the troop was in the village, Genka and Slava got down to copying the drawing.

First they had to find a smooth board on which to spread the drawing.

"This is crazy!" Genka said. "Why do you want to make such an exact copy? We know where the hiding-place is and we're making copies as a formality, nothing more."

But Slava insisted that he needed a smooth board. Besides, he drew well. Genka had to give way to him. They did not find a board that suited their purpose, but came across a cardboard paper-holder with the word "File" written on it. They placed this paper-holder on a tree-stump and put a stone on each of the four corners to prevent it from shifting. Then they put the drawing on the folder and stretched a page of tracing-paper over it.

Slava began to trace the drawing and Genka stood leaning over his shoulder, watching the pencil, offering advice and hurrying Slava. Why was he being so scrupulous about it? 'If it were he, Genka, he'd have it ready in no time! But Slava paid no attention to Genka and drew very carefully. When he began to trace the bird, Genka said:

"What are you doing? The bird means nothing." "It's on the drawing, so I've got to copy it," Slava replied. The bird gave him the most trouble. Before that it had been plain sailing: lines, curves and angles. But the bird was drawn with great care. 'It was an exact picture of the bird on the manor house.

"You're only wasting your time," Genka insisted. "It's simply an

emblem."

"Maybe not."

"Listen to me. You're wasting your time. We know everything there is to know."

But the conscientious Slava methodically went on tracing the bird. "It's your business," Genka grumbled, "but please don't trace the bird on my copy. I don't need that eagle."

He watched Slava with extreme displeasure. A whole hour spent on just that eagle! And only the first drawing at that! How long would he take to make three copies?



Slava at last finished copying the eagle and began to shade it in. "Hey, what are you doing?" Genka cried, losing his temper. "It's shaded in the original."

"Not all of it," Genka shouted, "and you're shading in the whole bird!"

"My mistake," Slava said, examining the drawing. Indeed, only the eagle's body was shaded in. The head was smeared over with black paint, while the legs were neither painted nor shaded.

"I missed that because of the tracing-paper. You can't see properly through it," Slava said, looking disgruntled. "I'll have to draw it all over again."

Genka tried to stop him. He could see no reason why more time should be wasted. The eagle was only in the drawing conditionally

and could have very well been left out. What difference did it make if it was shaded in or not? If Slava wanted to make another copy, he could give him, Genka, the spoilt one and could go on drawing for as long as he wanted.

"Take it if you like," Slava said, putting the spoilt copy aside. "I'll do the others properly. Exactly as in the drawing."

"See if I care."

Genka nonchalantly folded the copy Slava gave him and stuffed it into his pocket.

"Be careful," Slava remarked, "there may be a lot of trouble if you lose it." "I've never lost anything in my life."



Chapter 61

EAGLES

Slava had the copies ready by the time the troop returned from the village.

After supper, Genka and Slava gave the drawing back to Misha and showed him the copies.

Misha said nothing as he looked at the now useless copies. Poor Slava had spent half a day over them. And how neat they were!

"Where is the third copy?" Misha asked, playing for time.

"I've got it," Genka replied. "I took the spoilt one for myself."

"Why is it spoilt?" Misha asked, still hesitating to tell his friends the truth.

Genka put his copy beside the others and showed where it was spoilt.

"As a matter of fact," he said, "it's spoilt only because Slava says so. This eagle is of no importance whatever. It's simply the Karagayev emblem, like the bronze bird."

"I quite agree," Slava interjected, "that the shading may be of no importance, but since it's in the original I decided to copy it."

While his friends spoke, Misha looked closely at the drawing.

The bird really showed nothing, neither the place where the treasure was buried nor the road leading to it. The road was given by the lines and curves. They had gone over it the day before and had found it to be correct. The doctor had said that hundreds of people had already tried to find the treasure by the drawing and that meant they had studied it thoroughly. Nobody denied that. But why had the bird been drawn in this unusual way? However small and old the picture was, it was perfectly obvious that the head was painted black, the body—shaded in, and the legs left white. What

did it signify?

"What are you looking at?" Genka asked, watching the expression on Misha's face with curiosity and not without a measure of alarm.

"I'm trying to puzzle out what the bird stands for. Why it is here and why has it been drawn so strangely?"

"But what difference does that make?" Genka said, making a wry face. "All emblems mean no more than the eagles on tsarist five-kopek pieces: they're only emblems. Take any coin and on each there's a double-headed eagle. But it signifies nothing. I don't see what there is to puzzle out. We already know where the treasure is hidden. What we ought to do is not to think but to go and dig it out. That's all there is to it?"

"Are you sure?" Misha asked.

"Sure of What?"

"That we know where the treasure is hidden."

Genka lifted his hands.

"But we have been there yesterday."

Misha was silent for a moment, then said with a sigh:

"There's no treasure where we've been."

Genka and Slava stared at him.

"I mean it," Misha said. "There's no treasure near those four trees and there never was and never will be."

Genka and Slava continued staring at Misha—Genka with astonishment, Slava with inquiry.

"What are you staring at me for?" Misha demanded. "There's no treasure, that's all."

"Yes... but... what about the drawing, and the 'countess,' and everything we've done?" Genka mumbled.

"She's no countess!" Misha replied.

"But how do you know there's no treasure where we've been?" Slava asked.

"Here's how."

And Misha told his friends the story he heard from the doctor.

It was a cruel blow. The boys saw themselves as miserable fools, half-witted dreamers. How would they look people in the eyes? True, nobody knew anything, but all their friends had seen how mysteriously they had been behaving. Would they have to part with the hope of ever getting to the bottom of a secret nobody could solve? It was awful, to say the least!

No sooner had Misha unburdened himself than he felt better. It was as though he had thrown a heavy weight off his shoulders.

"It's a pity," Slava said at last, "yet it's what we should have expected. People have been looking for that treasure for ages and it was silly of us to think we could find it."

"That's the way things always turn out," Misha said with a shrug. "A lot of people keep looking until somebody stumbles across the thing everybody is looking for. That somebody could have been us. But it wasn't, worse luck."

Genka refused to give up the idea that there was buried treasure. He was

on the verge of tears.

"But there *is* buried treasure around here. The diamond *was* hidden! We've simply got to look for it."

"But where?"

"Where? Say, in the woods," Genka replied hesitantly.

"The woods have been dug up across their length and breadth. If the diamond exists, it is not in the woods. Of course, it is possible that the countess and the man in the green suit know where it is. As a matter of fact, do you know who the man in the green suit is?"

Misha told his friends of his suspicions.

"Of course," Genka said, his enthusiasm rising. "He is the count's son. That's clear as day. He's come for the diamond. And he's in league with the 'countess.'"

Slava, who had been attentively listening to his friends, said:

"If the 'countess' knew where the diamond was hidden, she would have dug it up long ago. A diamond can be kept anywhere. My idea is that the 'countess' doesn't know where the diamond is and neither does the count's son, if he really is the count's son. They're looking for it like the boatman and everybody else. But none of them can find it. And I don't think we can. The drawing was our only hope. And now that hope's gone."

"Yes, you're right," Misha mused, "nobody knows where the diamond is hidden. Nobody could solve the riddle set by the old count. But there must be an answer to the riddle! All the people who tried to solve it looked to the drawing, to the lines on it, as their guide, but the lines are just a blind, simply a false track. Perhaps the answer is not in the lines but in the eagle. The bird is supposed to show where the hiding-place is. And nobody paid any attention to it. That is probably why they haven't found anything. Drawings such as these never have anything superfluous, anything accidental in them. Everything must have a meaning."

"What are you gazing at the drawing for?" Genka asked. "It's clear enough that it's a sham."

"Yes," Misha agreed, "but still I wonder why the eagle's been drawn in such a funny way. Don't you think it's strange?"

The friends again turned their attention to the eagle. But it told them nothing. So far as they could see, it was a drawing of an ordinary eagle. --'

Misha remembered what Boris Sergeyevich had said about the bird, and Korovin's doubts concerning it.

"Incidentally, not everybody is sure" it's an eagle. Korovin said he didn't think it was, and he was born and bred on the Volga where you find a lot of eagles. Boris Sergeyevich claims it's not an eagle but a vulture. To be more exact, he said the bird has the head of a vulture."

Genka reluctantly agreed.

"Perhaps the head. But in everything else—it's an eagle. You may rest assured that I know what I'm talking about."

Indeed, Genka could be believed. Not counting physical training, biology was the only subject he was good at. He was the monitor of the biology circle and spent a great deal of time in the school's zoo.

"It's quite an ordinary eagle," Genka continued, "perhaps just a bit bigger than a steppe eagle. Therefore, it's a golden eagle."

"All right, fellows," Misha said, "here's how I look at it. The lines in the drawing only led people away from the scent; therefore, we have to try and guess what the shading stands for. Each of us has a copy of the drawing. So let's think."

"The shading on mine is all wrong," Genka complained. "How am I going to think?"

Chapter 62

KHALZAN

The boys began to think. The truth of the matter was that the entire troop began to think. Not about the shading, but about the bronze bird. They tried to place it. That task had been set by Misha. There were some very bright youngsters in the troop, who, Misha felt, could make an important contribution. Besides, it was hard to keep everything secret. Getting the troop to think of the bird was one way of diverting attention.

Soon the troop split into two factions.

One of them, headed by Genka, held that the bird was an eagle. True, the head was not quite usual, but that was no more than a bit of the sculptor's fancy.

The second faction, lead by the Bleater, considered that the bird belonged to the vulture family. They conceded that its body was somewhat short and stumpy for a vulture, but that was the result of the sculptor's ignorance.

"Look at the shape of its head," the Bleater said. "What eagle has such a long neck or such a big, flat and bald head? It might be a condor, a buzzard or simply a black or white-headed vulture. Naturally, if it was alive or stuffed we would know by its feathers and colouring. But the head definitely indicates that it belongs to the vulture and not the eagle family."

"You're making a mistake," Genka said. "Where have you ever seen such small condors? The span of a condor's wings is nearly three metres, while this bird's is hardly two metres. I agree that the head is a little strange, but in everything else it's an eagle. A so-called true eagle. The species includes the golden eagle or khalzan, the burial-ground eagle or karagush, and the steppe eagle, which is also known as the kurgan eagle. Then you have buzzards, but they are small. Therefore, this bird is a true eagle."

The factions argued all day long. As proof, each pointed to the bird's appearance, its habits, the ways it built its nest and reared its young and the kind of food it ate. As examples, they even cited novels where birds carried away not only children and lambs but also horses and hunters with all their equipment.

They argued heatedly. All the more because each faction was headed by a boy who always liked an argument—Genka and the Bleater. Matters

reached a stage where the leaders of the two factions nearly came to blows. Genka called the Bleater a white-headed vulture and the Bleater called Genka a khalzan.

"Hey, white-headed vulture," Genka shouted, "come here. I'll show you what's what!"

"Cheese it, you wretched khalzan," the Bleater responded.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourselves," Misha said, trying to pacify them. "Can't you discuss things calmly, without flying off the handle? We're conducting a serious investigation, but you're becoming personal. Imagine what the Academy of Sciences would have been turned into if real scientists behaved like this!"

"He called me a vulture!" the Bleater said, defending himself.

"Who started it?" Genka protested. "You called me a khalzan first. All day you've been poking it at me: khalzan, khalzan.... I'm not going to be a khalzan!"

Khalzan.... Khalzan.... The word sounded familiar. Misha looked first at Genka, then at the Bleater. Khalzan. Khalzan.

"Did you say khalzan?" Misha asked.

"Yes, khalzan."

"Is it a golden eagle?"

"Yes. Khalzan is just another name for it."

Khalzan! What was the local river called? The one where Kuzmin was murdered? Khalzan! That was where the name Khalzin Meadow came from. The very meadow that Kuzmin had set out for with Nikolai.

Misha was so taken aback by this discovery that Genka asked Worriedly:

"What's wrong with you? You're not ill?"

"Khalzan," Misha murmured. "Khalzan."

"It's a khalzan all right, but what of it?" Genka said, giving Misha a puzzled stare.

But the latter went on murmuring:

"Khalzan. Khalzan. The river."

"What are you mumbling?" Genka asked, lifting his arms in despair.

"Khalzan, that's right, khal...."

Suddenly, with a dazed look at Misha, Genka paused, then whispered:

"Khalzan."

His voice gradually rose:

"Khalzan. Khalzan."

He jumped and slapped himself on the knees.

"Khalzan! The devil take it! Khalzan!"

But Misha had already come to his senses:

"Don't get excited! Don't shout! We must have no panic! You say, Khalzan?"

"Yes, Khalzan," Genka whispered in the voice of a conspirator. "I at once connected the bird with the river."

"I put it to you that you never thought of it. You guessed it only now, with my help. And don't boast."

Genka felt offended.

"But I was the one who mentioned khalzans, while this white-headed vulture," he looked scornfully at the Bleater, "bores everybody stiff with his vultures."

The boys believed that they had found the first clue which might prove to be the most important one. The secret of the bronze bird was in the emblem itself and not in the false route that had deceived so many people.

They now had the first of the instructions—the Khalzan River. The treasure was buried somewhere near the river. Now it was clear why Kuzmin had been killed in Khalzin Meadow. The murder was linked with the treasure. That proved Nikolai Ribalin's innocence. True, that also freed the boatman from suspicion—he was searching for the treasure in the woods and probably knew nothing of the Khalzan. That could not be helped. In the end, the chief thing was to show that Nikolai was innocent. So far as they were concerned, the finding of the real murderer was a secondary problem. Perhaps they would get on his track when they would find the treasure.

But where were they to look for it? Although shallow, the river was fairly long. It was hardly marked on the new maps, but the old ones showed it to stretch across several uyezds.

The bronze bird should therefore contain other instructions, which undoubtedly were connected with the names of eagles, as in the case of the Khalzan River.

Genka, whose knowledge in this sphere Misha now trusted, again named all the eagles he knew. Some seemed to answer the purpose. Particularly the steppe eagle, which was also called the kurgan eagle. If that was of the same importance as the word khalzan, they would get a chain reading: the Khalzan River—a steppe—a kurgan. Splendid! Good for Genka that he knew birds! The Bleater had far to go to catch up with Genka! The inference was that near the river, in a steppe, there was a kurgan or burial mound, and that the treasure was buried in it. Well done! It was simply magnificent.

"That's absolutely right," Genka said in an authoritative tone of voice, "absolutely right and logical. Khalzan-steppe-kurgan. And vultures have nothing to do with it. Any ornithologist who's any good can never mix these two species. An eagle is an eagle and a vulture is a vulture. Khalzan is the Eastern name for the golden eagle, and we know that the Karagayevs originated from the Golden Horde. The Tatars lived in the steppes and probably built kurgans for their dead. Consequently, from the standpoint of zoology and of ethnography all what we've said is absolutely correct. We must go to the Khalzan River."

"Let us assume that that is so," said the cautious Slava. "We know there's a river called Khalzan. But what about a steppe? There's no steppe in the vicinity. Let's suppose that the plain is the steppe we want. All right. But what about the kurgan? Which kurgan? There are many hereabouts, but the ones we've seen are on the right bank of the Utcha. And all of them have

been dug up long ago. Even archaeological expeditions have stopped coming here."

"The task is not easy, of course," Misha agreed, "but there always are difficulties in such matters. We'll go to the Khalzan River early tomorrow morning."

"Bear in mind that tomorrow's Tuesday and that that Karagayev character is coming on Wednesday."

"We'll try and find all we want before he comes."

Chapter 63

KHALZAN-STEPPE-KURGAN

At the first sign of dawn, the boys set out for the Khalzan River. They were not afraid of anything, of course. All the same, it was frightening to go where a man had recently been murdered.

It was a misty morning. A gusty wind drove thin, shaggy clouds across the sky, bent the tops of the trees and flattened the grass. It grew so violent from time to time that it made walking difficult. But the boys pressed on across a marshy meadow along the bank of the Khalzan.

The river was shallow, almost dried up. In spring, it broadened out considerably for it flowed across a lowland. At this time of the year, however, it was no more than a tiny creek, thickly overgrown and scarcely noticeable amid the shrubbery and tall grass. Only in some shadowy places could one see a narrow clear stream of water flowing along the bottom.

The sight of this tiny stream was totally out of keeping with its loud-sounding name, with the mystery that surrounded it and with the fatal role it had played in the affairs of the Karagayevs. But that did not worry the boys, particularly Genka. He strode across the meadow with confident step and looked about him with the keen and meaningful gaze of a man on whose knowledge the outcome of the enterprise depended. Practically speaking, had it not been for him, nothing would have come out of this whole business. And they had the nerve to say that he was erratic in his studies. What was so erratic about it? A really gifted person is not a plodder: he had a talent for one thing and that was quite enough. Take Misha and Slava. They were all-rounders, yet when it came to differentiating between eagles, it had not been they but he, Genka, who had won the day.

So mused Genka, inwardly puffing himself up with the consciousness that his was an outstanding personality. This consciousness was so great that he even refrained from speaking his mind about it, feeling that at the moment a staid silence became a person such as he best of all.

Misha, who was not so certain of the expedition's success as Genka, nevertheless did not lose hope. He yearned for success, but in order not to be disappointed, he prepared himself for the worst. It was always wise to do that. They might not find anything today. But that did not mean that all was lost. They would go on with the search. The important thing was to continue

looking and not to lose hope.

Slava was sceptical. He looked upon himself as a person who regarded life realistically. In his opinion secrets, riddles and mysterious adventures belonged to the world beyond and since he did not believe there was such a world he ascribed a great deal to the teeming imagination of his friends. But he did not lag behind them because he was a good comrade.



After they had gone about three kilometres, the terrain began to rise, the ground became drier and stonier and the stream more sharply outlined. They came across boulders and big stones, but as far as the eye could see there was not a single kurgan.

Some two kilometres farther, their path was blocked by a big rock.

It was a lonely rock, a huge boulder unexpectedly sticking out in this comparatively flat countryside. Big, moss-overgrown stones lay at its base, but immediately beyond it, the stream disappeared as though it had gone underground.

The boys scrambled up to the top of the rock. In the darkish haze of the misty day they saw before them the monotonous and dreary panorama of a boundless plain. There were fields whichever way they looked. Even if they were to assume these fields were a steppe, there was nothing in them that could be described as a kurgan.

"There must be a kurgan somewhere here," Genka declared emphatically.

"Not that I can see," Slava said.

"That means we've got to push on."

Slava pointed to the foot of the rock.

"Look, the stream ends there. Perhaps the Khalzan flows from under this rock and has its source here. Where then are we to go?"

For a few moments, the boys stood silently on the top of the rock. The wind fell now and then only to rise again, howling and whistling.

Finally, Misha said:

"You're wrong, Slava. I've looked at a map. The Khalzan's source is much farther. Evidently, it grew very shallow here or flows under the ground and comes to the surface somewhere behind this rock."

Genka seized at the idea:

"That's right. Perhaps the treasure is buried close by."

"But where's your kurgan?" Slava asked.

"That's a boner. I forgot all about it."

"If we push on," Misha continued, "we'll definitely strike the Khalzan again. But ... but the trouble is that the former Karagayevo estate ends here, at this rock. Remember the map at the museum? According to it, the count's lands lay between the Utcha and the Khalzan. Obviously, he buried the diamond in his own land. But there's not a single kurgan on the estate. That is the trouble." Then Misha sadly added, "Slava's right. There's no point going any farther."

Feeling uncomfortable because he had proved to be right, Slava suggested:

"It's quite possible that the count meant a burial-ground and not a burial-mound eagle."

But no cemetery could be seen from the top of the rock.

Chapter 64

THE COMMUNE

The failure disheartened the boys. Had they been mistaken about the eagle as well? Tuesday was coming to a close. The man in the green suit would arrive tomorrow and they had found nothing.

There was news for them at the camp. Boris Sergeyevich had come from Moscow bringing with him an order authorizing the transfer of the estate to the commune. He was accompanied by Korovin and two other boys—future members of the commune—from the children's home.

This was exciting news! They had won the estate after all! Misha ran to find Boris Sergeyevich. But he only found Korovin. Boris Sergeyevich was at the Village Soviet.

Korovin and the two boys with him were measuring one of the sheds with a tape measure.

"So you got the place in spite of everything?" Misha said, greeting them.

Korovin sniffed, then replied:

"Naturally. We've taken it over and that's all there is to it. The Commissariat for Public Education gave the order."

"What about the house?"

"It's ours as well. Only the old woman asked Boris Sergeyevich to wait until Thursday."

"What for?"

"She's probably got some reason. She asked Boris Sergeyevich to wait, that's all I know. Boris Sergeyevich agreed. He offered her a job in the commune. Said, let her work."

"What did she say to that?"

"Nothing."

"Will she stay?"

"Where would an old woman like her go?"

"Why did she ask to put off the transfer until Thursday?" Misha said, pressing his question.

"I don't know." Korovin shrugged his shoulders. "Come on, fellows, pull that tape. We've got to finish with the sheds today and start measuring the land tomorrow."

The orphanage boys resumed their work.

Misha knew very well why the old woman was delaying the transfer of the house. She was waiting for Karagayev to ask his advice: perhaps something of value had to be smuggled out of the house.

But Misha said nothing about his suspicions either to Korovin or to Boris Sergeyevich. All he asked Boris Sergeyevich, when the latter returned from the Village Soviet, was:

"How did you manage to get the better of Serov?"

"Oh that fellow Serov!" Boris Sergeyevich shook his head. "Awl!"

"What awl?"

"The one who wrote about you in the papers."

"So it was him?"

"None other. Just an ordinary grafter. The kulaks were opposed to the commune. They realized they would have to return the land they had seized and so they bribed Serov. For a bribe he issued a safeguard for the manor-house although it has no historical value whatever. He's been thrown out of the Gubernia Department of Public Education."

"So that's it!" Misha drawled. "It was all Yerofeyev's doing. I suspected the 'countess.'"

Boris Sergeyevich shrugged his shoulders.

"The 'countess'.... She too had an interest in that. Evidently she wanted to keep the manor-house for her former master. She brought Yerofeyev and Serov together. The point is that Serov's wife is her sister."

Only now did Misha realize who Serov's wife had reminded him of. The "countess"! They were as like as two peas. Only one was older and the other younger.

How lucky for him that he had not given in to Serov's persuasions and threats. If he had he would only have been helping the kulaks and the former landowners. But he had sized up Serov immediately, had felt his insincerity and animosity. That showed that he, Misha, had political intuition. Hadn't he sized up Yerofeyev as well and hadn't he at once realized what the kulaks were after? Of course, it was all much more complicated than he thought. There was a chain here: Serov, Yerofeyev, the "countess," the boatman, Karagayev.... Possibly each had a purpose of his

own, but they were united by common interests. And, obviously, all this had a connection with Kuzmin's murder and with the charge against Nikolai Ribalin.

Ought he to tell all this to Boris Sergeyevich?

It was important for Boris Sergeyevich to know that the former owner of the estate had reappeared. But what if the man in the green suit was not the count's son, was not Karagayev? The boys had made so many mistakes already. Misha was afraid of making any more mistakes, of having people think he was talking nonsense. The best plan would be to wait until tomorrow and make sure the man was really the count. He could inform Boris Sergeyevich after that.

"Don't forget," he said, "that Yerofeyev and the other kulaks will never reconcile themselves to the commune."

Boris Sergeyevich laughed.

"We're not counting on their sympathy. We don't need it. And we're not afraid of them. It is they who are afraid of us. They know perfectly well that they will have to part with what they had seized by means of various unlawful transactions. We shall not allow them to throw their weight about in the village. They know that and that is why they are and will continue resisting. If you like you can watch them for yourself today."

"What's on today?"

"There will be a meeting this evening. Come and bring your troop. You'll learn something about the class struggle."

Chapter 65

THE MEETING

The troop arrived at the meeting in full strength. Everybody was interested. Besides, the meeting was taking place in the club, which, they felt, was theirs to some extent. They had built it.

Ordinarily only men attended the meetings, but this meeting attracted the entire village: men, women and children. It was stuffy in the club, but many of the people wore their sheepskin jackets and felt boots. A cloud of blue tobacco smoke hung beneath the wooden rafters. There was no ceiling. Actually, it was nothing but a big shed.

On the stage was a small table covered with a red cloth. Sitting at it were the chairman of the Village Soviet Ivan Vasilyevich and Boris Sergeyevich. The chairman rose to his feet and called for silence.

"Citizens," he said in a tone of voice he reserved for solemn occasions. "Citizens. I declare the meeting open. The central authorities have decided to organize a labour commune in the Karagayev estate for children who have been rescued from the streets. The report will be made by the headmaster, Boris Sergeyevich. Please, do not smoke."

But everybody went on smoking.

Boris Sergeyevich went up to the edge of the stage. The audience fell

silent and fixed their eyes on him.

"Comrades," Boris Sergeyevich began, "the commune is being organized for the pupils of a children's home. All of them have been waifs and some have even been delinquents. I am telling you this openly so that everybody will know how matters stand...."

He made a pause. A deep-toned hum began to fill the hall. At first it was the low, restrained conversation of many people in different parts of the hall. Then everybody spoke at once, loudly and excitedly. The climax was provided by a shrill female voice crying:

"They'll rob us and cut our throats."

The voice belonged to a woman with a baby in her arms. She was wearing a big, flowery shawl.

"I repeat, comrades," Boris Sergeyevich said, "that some of them have been delinquents, but that is a thing of the past. In the course of the few years they have spent at the children's home, they have become quite different. They have mastered various trades, know and like their work and have learnt to respect the collective. In short, I can vouch for each of them. You will see for yourselves that the best of relations will shape between you and the members of our commune. You will not be offended by them and, I hope, they will not be offended by you."

As Boris Sergeyevich spoke, the noise swelled up again. Misha followed the meeting attentively and saw that though the kulaks did not shout themselves, they encouraged everybody else. They sat around Yerofeyev and the shopkeeper in a small but united and embittered group, which was aware that it had the sympathy of most of the people at the meeting, because nobody wanted the commune and they were all afraid of the communards, about whom they had been told hair-raising stories.

Misha was sorry for Boris Sergeyevich, who looked so alone on the stage as he faced the hostile meeting, which refused to listen to him and kept interrupting him with malicious jibes. His sympathies were all with Boris Sergeyevich, but he could do nothing to help him.

Meanwhile, the meeting stormed and raged. The women were particularly agitated.

"We don't want your commune!" they shouted. "We'll chase those bandits of yours away whatever happens! Go back from where you came!"

The chairman rose to his feet and cried out:

"Order! Order! Let the comrade have his say and we'll discuss the matter afterwards. Women, be quiet! If you don't I'll turn you out!"

"Just try!" a perky female voice shouted in reply. "We'll turn *you* out!"

There was an outburst of laughter. But the noise did not abate, on the contrary—it grew louder.

Boris Sergeyevich did not even try to say anything. He stood on the stage, sternly gazing at the meeting from under his spectacles.

It was then that Misha, Genka, Slava and all the other youngsters did what they usually did at school meetings whenever there was a noise such as now—they chanted:

"Si-lence! Si-lence! Si-lence!"

At first, their voices were lost in the general hubbub, but when they were joined by many of the village children, they outshouted everybody.

That was so new and unexpected that the villagers fell silent and stared in bewilderment at the children.

Finally, at a sign from Misha, the youngsters stopped shouting just as suddenly as they had begun.

Taking advantage of the silence and the ensuing general embarrassment, Boris Sergeyevich said:

"You also have children. There they are, sitting beside you." He shot an attentive and reproachful look at the women sitting in the front rows with children, and continued, "Your children are sitting beside you. You love them and watch over them. After the meeting they will go home where they have food, a bed, a roof over their heads, and the care of their mothers. Why then are you so cruel to children whom war, ruin and famine have deprived of everything—home, family and parents? I ask you why are you so cruel and unjust to them? What wrong have they done to you?"

He paused, waiting for an answer.

But silence was the only reply. Everybody sought to avoid Boris Sergeyevich's glances. Tears welled up in the eyes of some of the women. They did not hide their tears, but pretended they were blowing their noses.

The boys were jubilant. Boris Sergeyevich had found the right words! There was no denying that he had made an impression.

In a severe and stirring tone of voice, he continued: "Our country is poor. But the Soviet authorities have done everything in their power to return children to life, to make good citizens out of them. Nobody will be permitted to hinder this great and noble task. Neither those who are hoping that the landlords will return and are keeping their estates for them, nor those who have illegally taken land and are exploiting other peasants." He looked sternly at Yerofeyev and the men around him. All eyes followed his gaze.

"In short," Boris Sergeyevich said in conclusion, "it has been decided to organize a labour commune. That decision is final and irrevocable. I came here not to ask your permission, but to discuss with you how we shall live and work together. If you want to discuss that question, I shall be only too glad to do it. If you don't want to, I can go away. But we shall have a commune all the same."

Yerofeyev asked for the floor. He climbed up to the stage, took off his cap, revealing a bald head, and said:

"What the comrade representative has said about the children is quite true. We, too, want things to be done justly, as God commands, so that nobody is offended by us and we are not offended by anybody. But the comrade representative said nothing about the land. We want to know what's going to be done about it."

"The commune does not claim anybody's land," Boris Sergeyevich said, "it will only take what belongs to the government and is being illegally used by citizen Yerofeyev and certain other citizens. Do you have the right, citizen Yerofeyev, to own nearly 250 acres of land?"

"Not I, but the whole community is using it," Yerofeyev said, sweeping the hall with his hand as if to show that everybody present was using the land in question.

The woman in the shawl, who had cried out about the communards, suddenly shouted:

"What are you pointing at us for? We have never so much as smelt that land! You've raked it in all for yourself!"

Paying no attention to this outburst, Yerofeyev continued: "The land is mine by law. I have a paper from the gubernia authorities to prove it."

Boris Sergeyevich looked sternly at Yerofeyev and said:

"We know how much you paid for that paper, citizen Yerofeyev."

Yerofeyev shot a guarded look at him, then lifted his arms:

"I don't know what you are talking about."

"You will very soon," Boris Sergeyevich said curtly. Then he addressed the meeting, asking, "Whoever else is using that land, will they please stand up."

Nobody stood up. There was complete silence, which was broken after a few moments by an old man, who said:

"We all know who's using it."

Yerofeyev suddenly stretched out his hands, turned the palms up and said:

"These are the hands that ploughed the land. Am I not a working man?"

The woman in the shawl sprang up from her seat and cried:

"You, a working man? All you do with those hands is to count money! You have spun a web around the whole village and now you want to be called a working man!"

That started another hubbub. But this time resentment was levelled at Yerofeyev, the shopkeeper and the other kulaks. Long-standing grievances were aired, people recalled the injustices and humiliations they had suffered at the hands of the local rich. Misha watched Longshanks' mother: this was the moment for her to get up and tell everybody how Yerofeyev had tried to persuade her to betray her own son. But Maria Ivanovna sat silently in a corner, her sad eyes fixed on the speakers.

The chairman banged on the table with the palm of his hand.

"Citizens! Enough wrangling! The question is clear. We shall have former waifs living here in a labour commune. And if certain people are looking after their own skins, that is their own affair. All the working peasants, the poor and the middle alike, are eager to give a helping hand. Therefore, let us ask Boris Sergeyevich to tell us how he intends to organize the work of the commune. In other words, we want to know what assistance is expected from us."

Boris Sergeyevich told the meeting what work the members of the commune would do, what crops they would grow, what orchards they would plant, what workshops and auxiliary enterprises they would have and how all that would benefit the people in the neighbourhood.

Everybody listened with close attention. Perhaps he did not win over all of them, but the majority felt that truth was on his side and not on the side

of those who exploited them.

Misha and his friends skipped with joy. They thought Boris Sergeyevich's speech was wonderful. He had drawn such an alluring picture of the commune that all of them wanted to join it, to stay in Karagayevo, in a new place, and create a new enterprise of the "new," as Boris Sergeyevich put it, "communist type...."

Chapter 66

LAMMERGEYER

When the meeting ended it was already dark. The rain had stopped, the sky was clear of clouds and myriads of stars were twinkling in it. Raindrops showered down from leaves and branches when the youngsters brushed against trees and shrubs.

Boris Sergeyevich and Misha walked behind the others. From the darkness in front came shouts and halloos, the loud laughter of Zina Kruglova, the hurt mumbling of Kit, and the indignant voice of the Bleater.

"What if the former owner of the manor suddenly appeared?" Misha asked. "Do you think he could hinder the commune?"

"How?" Boris Sergeyevich laughed. "The estate has been confiscated and now belongs to the state."

"Do you know where the former counts are?"

"The old count went abroad before the Revolution, but nobody knows where his son is. What difference does that make?"

It cost Misha a great effort to keep from telling Boris Sergeyevich what difference that made. He decided he would tell him if tomorrow the man in the green suit proved to be Count Karagayev.

"Have you ever given a thought to the Karagayev emblem?" Misha said. "What I wanted to ask you is if you know what the bird in the emblem is supposed to be."

"An eagle. Judging by the head it's a lammergeyer or bearded eagle. Something between an eagle and a vulture, a transitional species, so to say. True, the experts I've spoken to believe the body is of an eagle, while the head is definitely that of a lammergeyer. Here," he produced his notebook, "I have a description: 'Big head, flat in front and rounded at the back; covered with bristly, fluff-like feathers. Big beak, long and ending in a sharp hook. Base of the beak is surrounded by bristles, which cover the lower half of the beak. That is why the bird is also called a bearded eagle.' "

Misha listened tensely, but what he heard did not offer a clue. Lammergeyer, bearded eagle.... Half-eagle, half-vulture.... No, that led nowhere. Khalzan, kurgan, burial-ground—that was concrete. But bearded eagle meant nothing.

Had they made a mistake about the eagle as well? Was it on the emblem to no purpose and that their guesses were worth as little as the drawing of the route?

All the same, Misha decided to tell Genka and Slava what he learned from Boris Sergeyevich. When the camp grew quiet, he called them out of the tent, took them aside and said:

"Here's what, chaps. Boris Sergeyevich says that the bird has the head of a lammergeyer or bearded eagle."

"So what?" Genka said irritably. "Didn't I tell you the head is unusual, not like a real eagle's? It's quite possible that it's a lammergeyer's, I won't argue about that. But I can't see why that's so important. After all, except for the head, the bird's an ordinary eagle."

"What about the drawing?" Misha insisted. "On it the head of the eagle is black to distinguish it from the body and the legs. That means there's something special about it. And the head is of a lammergeyer."

Genka again winced irritably.

"I don't know. I don't know. What has a lammergeyer to do with it? In Russia, we hardly have any of those birds. You find them sometimes only in the Caucasus and in the Himalayan Mountains. If you want to know, the lammergeyer lives at a higher altitude than any other mountain bird—in the region of glaciers and eternal snow. Where could a lammergeyer appear from here, in the central belt of Russia? It nests only on cliffs. What cliffs are there around here? Not a single rock."

"Oh yes, there is! What about the rock we climbed today?"

Genka laughed.

"Call that a rock? Get this through your nut: it builds its nests on inaccessible cliffs."

"That makes no difference," Misha declared decisively, "but just look at what it all means. The eagle represents the Khalzan River, its head—the rock on the Khalzan, the paws—a burial mound ...a grave on the rock. Does that penetrate? Khalzan-rock-grave."

Slava yawned noisily. He was dying to go to sleep. To be quite frank, he was tired of all these guesses and did not believe any of them. One eagle, then another, and so on to infinity. If it had only been a matter of eagles, the diamond would have been found long ago. The people who had looked for it had probably not been fools either.

"We've been on the rock today, but we didn't see any grave," Slava said, yawning again.

"That's true," Misha replied eagerly, "but we didn't look for it. We must go over the whole rock carefully."

"When?" Genka and Slava asked nervously.

"Now. At once."

But Genka and Slava flatly refused to go. What would they see at night? Exactly nothing. It would be just a waste of time. All that that would get them was the loss of a good night's rest. Besides, the man in the green suit was due tomorrow and they had to be fresh and ready.

"So you won't go?" Misha demanded in a threatening tone of voice.

"No!" his friends replied firmly.

"What if I order you?"

"You've no right to do that," Slava said. "If it concerned the troop, you'd

be in your rights. But this is a private affair and you can't order us around."

For some time, the question whether Misha had the right to order them was argued hotly. Each stuck to his own opinion, but Genka and Slava refused to go to the rock.

Misha appealed to their reason, accused them of cowardice, promised certain success, threatened to go alone, argued that perhaps it would be too late tomorrow because the count would forestall them. But all to no avail. Genka and Slava refused point-blank to go to the Khalzan River. Slava no longer believed there was hidden treasure, while Genka refused to recognize that the bird had the head of a lammergeyer. He trembled with fury when he heard anyone mention a vulture. And both wanted to go to bed.

Grudgingly, Misha yielded. But he made his friends promise that they would go to the rock in the morning.

"Bear in mind," Genka added after he gave his word, "the Bleater's vultures are out of the picture."

Chapter 67

COUNT KARAGAYEV

Wednesday!

Boris Sergeyevich, Korovin and the two other boys went to measure the land. The troop, led by Zina Kruglova, marched away to the club. Misha, Genka and Slava kept a vigilant watch over the manor-house.

The "countess" did not go to town. Her meeting with the man in the green suit would therefore take place here. He was due by the day train, that is, at two o'clock. Misha told Genka to be at the station to meet the train.

At approximately half past one, the "countess" emerged from the house. Misha and Slava stealthily followed her. She went through the orchard and, taking a path along the fringe of a small woods, reached the bank of the Utcha at a point above the village and the estate.

A man in a green suit approached the river almost at the same time. But Genka was nowhere to be seen. That meant the man had not left the train at the siding, but had gone on to the next station.

He looked like a holiday-maker. He wore a green summer suit, yellow shoes and a light-coloured cap. In his hands he had a bouquet of field flowers.

He and the "countess" greeted one another and walked away in the direction opposite to the manor-house. Misha and Slava had to creep along the bank in order to keep the pair in sight. But they could not hear a word of their conversation.

The "countess" and the man in the green suit returned along the same path and stopped not far from where the boys were hiding.

"How long will it take you?" the man asked.

"About forty minutes."

"I'll wait here."

The "countess" went to the boat station. The man in the green suit disappeared behind the bushes growing along the bank. He undressed and dived into the river. The boys heard him splashing and snorting, and slapping the water with his hands.

Soon the stranger climbed back to the bank. There was the sound of a newspaper rustling, then all was still.

The boys did not move. To them every minute seemed as long as an hour. The sun was already beginning to sink in the west. A grasshopper chirped in the grass. Overhead, a skylark was tumbling high in the sky.

The stranger rose to his feet. Evidently, he was dressing.

At long last, the "countess" returned. The stranger, already dressed, with glistening, carefully-smoothed hair, went to meet her. They stopped near the boys' hiding-place. The stranger had his back to them, but they could see the "countess" face.

"He says it's all right," she said.

"How many are there?"

"He and two others, who are in the woods."

"When can they be there?"

"In two hours."

The stranger glanced at the sun, then looked at his watch.

"Let them come in three hours," he said.

"I'll tell them."

"With crowbars and spades."

"All right. I've already sent them two sackfuls of tools. Only ... Alexei ... I wanted to warn you. The boatman suspects you."

"Of what?"

"Of... well, this business ... with Kuzmin."

"How does he know who I am?"

"He does not know that. He said, 'Kuzmin was murdered by the man you go to meet at the museum.'"

"Did he follow you?"

"Yes. He was sure that I was not telling him where the real place is. He is clever and dangerous."

"So am I."

"Alexei.... About this peasant .. Kuzmin. How did it happen?"

The boys strained their ears, afraid of missing a single word. Now they would learn the most important thing.

Karagayev shrugged his shoulders.

"We met. He recognized me and I was afraid he would give me away. What could I do? There's one peasant less, in the world."

"But Ribalin is being released."

"There is nothing against him. But there is nothing against me either. Of course, we must finish this business quickly. Today."

"Are you sure it's the right place?"

"Quite. To think that he led us a dance for so many years! The beast!"

"Don't say that, Alexei!" the "countess" said in a hypocritical tone of voice. "He is dead and he is your father. Lord, when; I think...."

"Oh, stop your lamentations!" Karagayev said angrily. "I spent the best years of my life looking for that stone. I stayed in Russia. Damn it!" He slapped himself on the forehead. "Why did I never think of opening the vault? What an idiot!"

Misha threw a fast and very reproachful glance at Slava. He had been right, after all: rock—vault. That was what the lammergeyer stood for.

Slava blinked guiltily. What else was there for him to do?

"I think it would be better if we didn't have the boatman and his men," the "countess" said.

"The vault is blocked up. I can't manage it by myself. I've tried already."

"Perhaps we could get others?"

"For instance?"

"Yerofeyev and somebody else."

"No! I prefer to deal with crooks. They're easier to come to terms with, cheaper, and you can be sure they won't sell you."

"But they might kill you."

"I'm armed."

After a pause, Karagayev said:

"Go now. Tell him to be there in three hours' time."

Chapter 68

THE VAULT

There was no time to be lost! They had to act at once and resolutely!

Misha did not reproach his friends. It was too late for that now. As soon as Karagayev and the "countess" disappeared from view, he turned to Slava:

"Well, how's this for a 'private affair'?"

"It isn't private," replied the ashamed Slava.

That was Genka's opinion, too. He was waiting for his friends in the camp. He had not seen the man in the green suit at the station, but he had seen the investigator alight from the train. However, he had not noticed where he went after he came off the train.

"Pity he didn't look in at the camp," Misha said. "The murderer is here. It's nothing to joke about. Genka, run to the village and find out if the investigator's there."

Genka sped to the village, but he did not find the investigator.

The boys were worried. They did not know what to do. There was no sense in going to the rock. They could not get the better of the count now. All that remained for them to do was to tell Boris Sergeyevich everything.

Boris Sergeyevich listened without interrupting. The story sounded fantastic, but he gave no sign that he doubted it. He got up and said:

"We must go to the rock!"

They went to Khalzin Meadow accompanied by the whole troop. Even Kit categorically refused to stay behind, for once his excitement being

greater than the lure of kitchen duty. On the way, Boris Sergeyevich got the chairman of the Village Soviet and two peasants to go along with him and act as witnesses. But the news that the treasure would be dug up in Khalzin Meadow spread through the whole village like wildfire. Before the troop reached the rock, it was overtaken by a huge throng of peasants, among whom there was even the doctor. Evidently, the news had already reached the neighbouring village.

Soon there was a large number of people around the rock. Misha was surprised to see the boatman and the two men from the woods among them. But there was no sign of the man in the green suit.

The sun was sinking beyond the horizon. Its dying rays illuminated the rock and the excited throng around it. On one side the rock rose in a sheer wall; the other, sloping side was strewn with stones of various sizes. On almost the very top were three big boulders, and_ to reach the top, one had to skirt round these boulders. Boris Sergeyevich and Misha examined the boulders and on the ground beneath them found fresh traces left by a spade or a pick: someone had tried to move them.

Boris Sergeyevich called the chairman of the Village Soviet and a few peasants. Crowbars and spades were quickly brought into play and the soil around the boulders was loosened. One after another they were rolled off the rock.

A tombstone came into view. There was so much moss and grass on it that few people would have guessed it was a tombstone. When the soil around it was cleared away, its outlines emerged quite distinctly.

"They're desecrating a grave," Yerofeyev said. "It's devil's work."

One of the peasants laughed:

"The grave isn't where it should be. Its place is in the cemetery, but look where it's got to."

When the hole was wide enough, the tombstone was moved aside with crowbars. There was a small recess beneath it.

The crowd closed in around the hole. Everybody wanted to see what it contained.

"Step back, citizens," the chairman said, "we'll show it to everybody."

Just then the "countess" and Karagayev approached the rock. They came up unnoticed, for attention was riveted to the vault. Only Misha, the boatman and Yerofeyev kept their eyes fixed on them. From the expression on Yerofeyev's face, it was evident that he had recognized the young count the moment he had seen him.

In the recess beneath the tombstone was a black metal casket. Boris Sergeyevich lifted it. It was locked. He broke the lock and opened the casket. In it lay a brooch strewn with shining stones in the centre of which sparkled a magnificent diamond.... Boris Sergeyevich took the brooch out of the casket and, holding it aloft, showed it to the crowd.

Suddenly, pushing his way through the crowd, Karagayev went up to Boris Sergeyevich.

The "countess" followed him.

"That casket belongs to me," the "countess" said.

"Possibly," Boris Sergeyevich replied in a courteous tone of voice, but he did not give her the casket.

"Give it to me," the "countess" said, stretching out her hand.

"I cannot," Boris Sergeyevich said. "It will be handed over to the proper authorities and you can apply to them."

What people least expected happened at that moment. Karagayev snatched the casket out of Boris Sergeyevich's hands.

It was done so insolently and suddenly that everybody was taken aback and stood stock-still.

Boris Sergeyevich grew pale and took a step towards Karagayev.

"What is the meaning of this? Give it back to me at once!"

Karagayev whipped a pistol out of his pocket. The crowd drew back. With the pistol in one hand and the casket in the other, Karagayev slowly retreated to the base of the rock. When he reached level ground he was caught unawares by a curt:

"Drop that gun!"

He wheeled around. Behind him stood the investigator and two Red Army soldiers. With the soldiers was Nikolai Ribalin. He looked at Misha and his face broke into the friendly smile Misha knew so well.



Chapter 69

RESULTS AND OMISSIONS

Every day the train brought fresh groups of children bound for the labour commune. Tools and various other equipment were carted from the station. The members of the commune were busy repairing the house, building sheds and installing machinery in the workshops.

For the troop the time was fast approaching when they had to leave. It

was August and the leaves on the trees were turning gold, the nights were growing chillier and it was already too cold to sleep out of doors in tents.

Besides, they had, in effect, done all they had set out to do. Nikolai Ribalin had been released. The riddle of the bronze bird had been solved. The manor and the estate now belonged to the labour commune. Twelve of the villagers had been taught to read and write. A Young Pioneer detachment had been organized in the village.

The youngsters spent their last days in the camp helping the commune. Kit was seldom seen outside the kitchen. But everybody knew it was time to leave. The members of the commune were replanning the orchard. Out of tact they did not say that the troop's tents were in their way, but the troop knew it. Of course, they could easily move their tents somewhere else, but the feeling was that if they had to leave the old site it would be best to go away altogether.

They were sorry to part with the manor and estate, the village, the commune.

"Be sure to come again next year," Nikolai Ribalin said, smiling. "I'll help you with your carpentering. We'll build a new club, a capital building, so that it can be used in winter as well."

Yerofeyev sighed.

"You can't deny that the children have done quite a bit of work. We are grateful to you for your assistance. And you have helped to clear an innocent man."

But his little eyes roved with guarded suspicion and everybody doubted the sincerity of his words.

The artist-anarchist announced that he, too, was going to Moscow.

"There is more scope for a gifted person," he said, "more opportunities. Theatres, sign-boards, façades. Look, boys, if there is anything that needs to be painted in your school, I'd be only too glad to oblige."

Misha made haste to assure him that there was no such need.

The troop was due to leave for Moscow by the evening train. Everything—the tents, the blankets and all personal effects—was already packed. Before leaving they lit a big farewell camp-fire.

The members of the commune with Boris Sergeyevich at their head and all the village children came to the camp-fire.

Misha opened the meeting with the words:

"This is our last camp-fire. It is our custom to sum up the results of our work. But we shall say nothing of what we have done. On the contrary, we shall speak of what we have left undone. That will be useful for those who are staying behind. Who wants to speak?"

Slava raised his hand.

"We organized a detachment in the village," he said. "But only thirty-two children joined it. That is too little. All the children in the village must become Young Pioneers."

"We did a poor job abolishing illiteracy," Zina Kruglova said. "We only taught twelve people. Our aim was to wipe out illiteracy in the whole village."

"There is no hospital in the village," the Bleater said, "and when people fall ill they have to go to the neighbouring village. That isn't right. Medicine is a powerful weapon in the fight against religious prejudices."

"Our international ties are not much," declared Igor and Seva. "We only sent two letters to Young Pioneers in Germany. Meanwhile, fascism is rearing its head. We have to give this our most serious attention."

When the speeches were over, Misha said:

"It was right to bring up all those points. We hope that the members of the commune will take up where we stopped and do the work better than we could have done."

In behalf of the labour commune, Boris Sergeyevich assured the troop that all the unfinished work would be finished by the commune.

"Well, that is all," Misha announced. "We can go now."

But Genka suddenly yelled:

"No, that isn't all! There's something that needs to be finished!""

"What?"

"Remember, Misha recited his poem to us. On the whole, the verses weren't bad. But the last two lines were missing. I've written them."

"Come on, read them," Misha said, "only be quick about it."

He felt ashamed when Genka mentioned the poem. He had hoped that it was forgotten.

"Well, then," Genka said, assuming a theatrical pose. "The last stanza of Misha's poem read:

*The struggle has only begun.
The hammer to us has been -passed.
And the whole wide world in chains is enmeshed.*

That is where it stopped. I suggest ending it like this:

*But we are strong and our spirit is young.
So, forward, comrades, follow me.*

And he stretched out his arm, calling upon everybody to follow him.

But nobody liked the lines.

"Why should we follow you?" some said. "What have you done that we should all follow you?"

"Oh, well," Misha said, "we'll try and finish the poem in Moscow. I mean, if anybody wants to. In the meantime, let's hurry or we'll miss our train."

Boris Sergeyevich wanted to let the troop have a cart for their things. But the youngsters declined his offer. They were not sissies and could march with their kit on their backs.

They shouldered their simple belongings, lined up and marched off to the station.

Moscow

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